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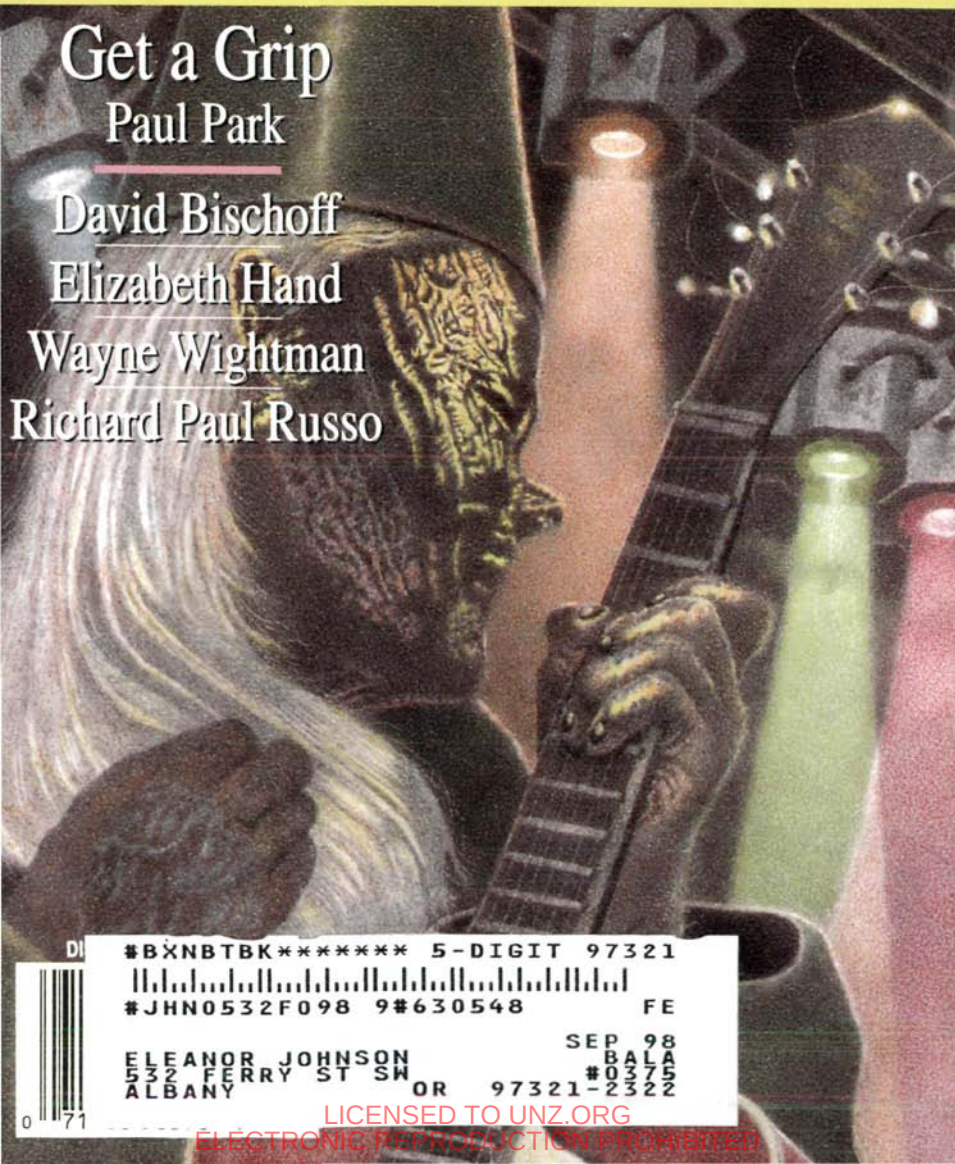

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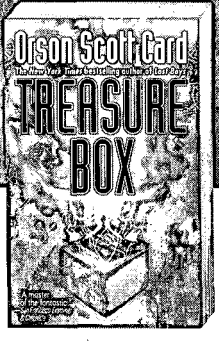

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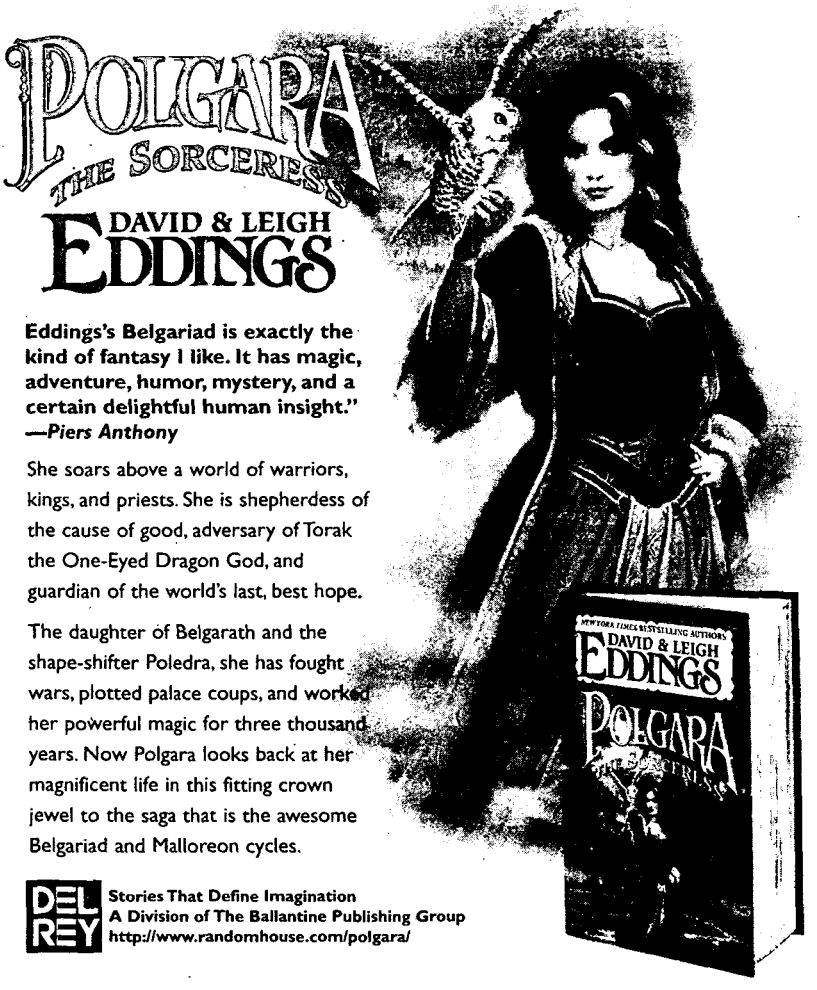

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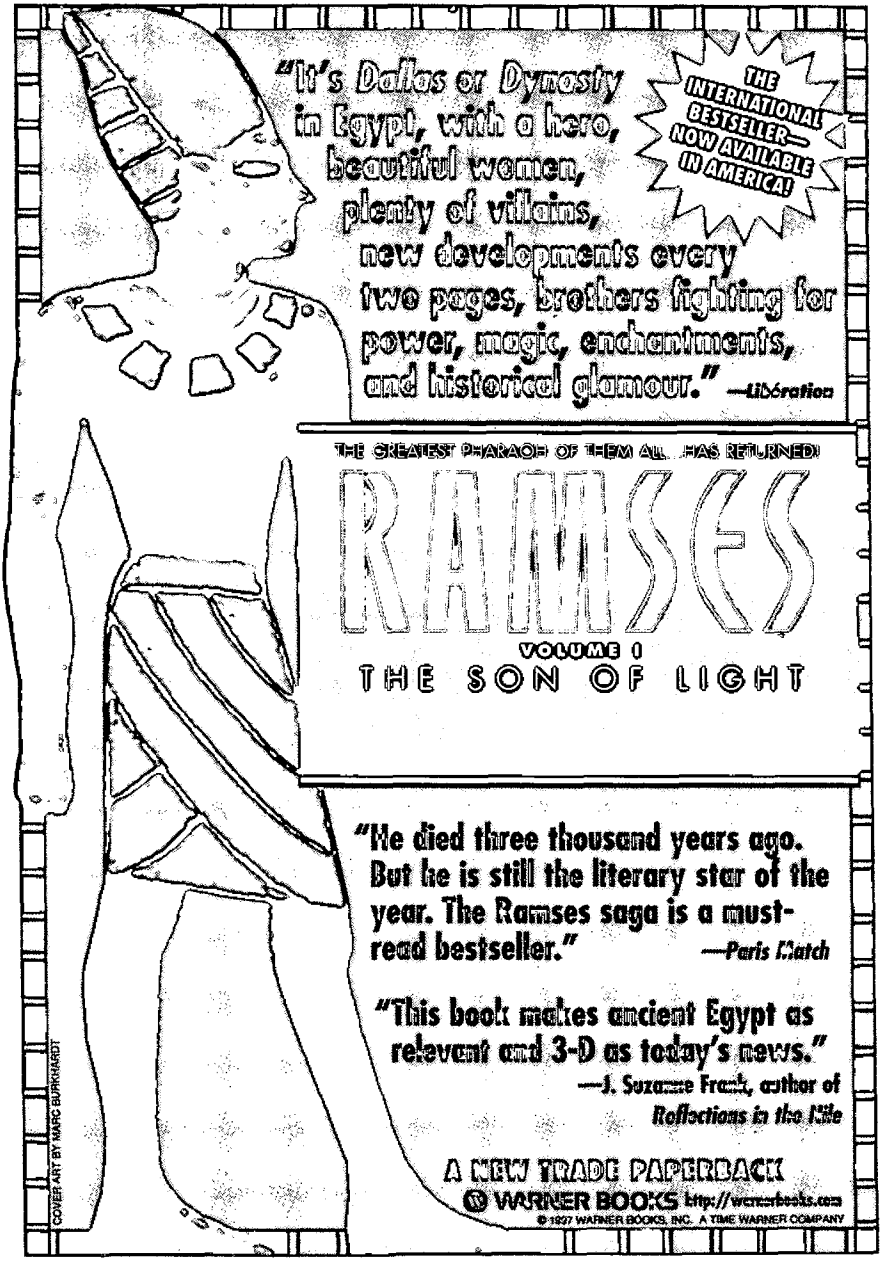
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December • 48th Year of Publication

NOVELETS

THE IDIOT'S DREAM 134 Wayne Wightman and Richard Paul Russo

SHORT STORIES

JEW ON A CHIP 9 Robert Grossbach
IN THE BLEAK MID-SOLSTICE 35 David Bischoff
GET A GRIP 54 Paul Park
THE QUICK AND THE DEAD 67 Carrie Richerson
A DOG'S NIGHT 82 Michael Carr
TOMORROW TEA 94 Laurel Winter
SCHRÖDINGER'S CATALYST 110 Stephen Dedman
'TIS THE SEASON 123 K.D. Wentworth

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 26 Charles de Lint
BOOKS 30 Elizabeth Hand
SCIENCE: WATCH THE SKIES 101 Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty

CARTOONS: Arthur Masear (34); Benita Epstein (81,109); S. Harris (93).
COVER BY STEPHEN GERVAIS FOR "IN THE BLEAK MID-SOLSTICE."

EDWARD L. FERMAN, Publisher — GORDON VAN GELDER, Editor
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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

THIS PAST summer, a lot of people within my earshot raised the subject of "the death of science fiction." Articles on the topic appeared in diverse publications like *The New York Review of Science Fiction* and *Chronicles: The Journal of Higher Education*, and panel discussions at various sf conventions I attended hashed out the issue. Having now heard most of the arguments, I have to stop and ask, what death of science fiction?

Last time I checked the bookstores in my neighborhood, their sf sections appeared to be very lively. Personally, I think there's more good sf getting published nowadays than most people have time to read, there are plenty of interesting new writers coming into the field, and lots of the field's veterans are producing top-flight work. So what's this talk about sf dying?

As near as I understand them, the main arguments in the case for sf's death are that the backlist is dead, the midlist is dead, there are no new sf bestsellers, science fiction in other media is killing print sf, kids don't read sf, and They Just Don't Make Sf Like They Used To. (Pundits, please let me know if I missed any major points in this list.) While I don't have space enough to tackle all of these issues this month—in particular, I'll have to let the subject of other media wait for another time — I would like to voice a few general thoughts.

Every single time I've raised the question of "science fiction's death" with a professional colleague, the discussion has turned to money and book royalties within ten seconds. It seems to me that too many people are confusing quality with commerciality. Science fiction has become such a big business concern that genre professionals have generally adopted the Hollywood attitude of "That which sells is good." So let me offer a little reminder that until the late 1960s,

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science fiction books were largely considered "underground" or "cult" fiction and most of the books we regard today as classics came out in relative obscurity as pulp paperbacks. Early publishers of sf were often looking to exploit a market and make a buck, and their forgettable books are forgotten now. Novels like *More Than Human*, *The Dying Earth*, and *Darker Than You Think* endure because of their quality, not because they spent X weeks on the bestseller list.

The people who predict the death of science fiction because some paperbacks are selling 15,000 copies instead of 20,000 sound absurd to me. Would you assess the health of life in the ocean solely by counting the number of scuba divers who go swimming in the Caribbean? Market size is only one factor in determing the vitality of science fiction, and in my opinion, not one of the biggest.

If the doomsayers get past the issues of commerce and actually discuss the books, they mourn the fact that they can't find sf anymore with that Sense of Wonder. In his article in *Chronicles*, "Science Fiction, R.I.P.," Thomas F. Bertonneau celebrates his favorite writers like Ray Bradbury and Clifford Simak and complains that:

> ...publishers today favor the prolific and mediocre serialists (many of them female MFAs) who churn out a treacly mixture of dragonlore, pseudo-epic, cyberpunk, and 12-step philosophizing, much of it stylistically indistinguishable from the romance novels that the authors would otherwise, and perhaps do, compose.... To visit the science fiction section, so-called, of the local Borders or Barnes and Noble is, for a 40-year-old connoisseur, a depressing experience.

Mr. Bertonneau's article is a prime example of the sort of lament that actually has nothing to do with the state of science fiction and everything to do with the author's own lost youth. For he is, of course, remembering the past by its best examples and judging the present by...well, I'd say he's judging it by its worst examples, but I don't think he has actually *read* any recent sf (he cites only one novel from the 1990s in his piece). He's more interested in judging books by their covers than he is in reading them, and I'm sure that if he turned the pages of 1990s novels by Greg Egan, Nicola

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Griffith, or Vernor Vinge (to name just three), he'd feel differently.

But Mr. Bertonneau does touch on some important things in his article, particularly the bookstore problem. Back in 1960, he wouldn't have been so distressed by the sf section of the store because *it didn't exist back then.* Remember please that sf specialty shops like A Change of Hobbit in L.A. and The SF Shop in New York were founded in the 1970s because sf could be so hard to find.

Nowadays, it's true that the shelves are glutted and many of the best books don't get wide distribution. It's hard to walk into a bookstore, pick a book randomly off the sf shelves, and get a satisfying read. (I have my doubts about whether it was ever easy to find a good book in such a manner — I've read a lot of old paperbacks, and trust me, they're not all winners. Shall we discuss the worst of the Ace doubles?) But there's no shortage of reviewers pointing the way to good books, and I can offer one ultra high-tech solution to this serious problem of being unable to find those good books. It is called a "library card." In terms of making good new books available, it works wonders.

Mr. Bertonneau reminds me a lot of the people who lament that there is no sf nowadays like Robert A. Heinlein's classic juveniles. While Heinlein's classics are still around — many in print, more in libraries — it needs to be said that those books are products of their time, and everything fades with time. To expect a book like *Podkayne of Mars* to have the same impact now that it did in 1963 is to pretend that nothing has changed in 34 years, which is denying consensus reality. Personally, when I was a teen, my father tried so hard to inflict his love of Heinlein's works on me that I rebelled and found wonder instead in the amazing imagery of J. G. Ballard's "Drowned Giant" or Philip K. Dick's "Faith of Our Fathers." Every generation — every *reader* — with an open mind finds the universe's wonders in different books, and demanding that today's youth marvel at the same books their parents read is engaging in a form of cultural bullying. Times change, interests change, and it's absurd to deny that Outer Space or Inner Space or Cyberspace holds no marvels for a reader.

For the real truth is that the universe is still full of wonder and mystery, and as long as we humans have a future and imagination enough to speculate about it, science fiction will continue to thrive.

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Whether your tune is "Oh Tannenbaum" or "Dreidel Dreidel Dreidel," December's holiday season is a good time to investigate questions of faith...and oy, *have we got a question for you! Here Robert Grossbach provides (with acknowledged assistance from Rabbis Gary Johnson, Alan Greenbaum, and Moshe Bryski—three wise men no doubt), a tale of modern miracles, the perfect story to read by the light of an electric menorah...*

Jew on a Chip

By Robert Grossbach

I DIDN'T REALIZE IT AT THE time, but the call, from Professor Arnold Landes at the University of Michigan Computer Engineering Department, was made over the only functioning non-commercial phone circuit in the entire United States. After introducing himself and apologizing for contacting me at three A.M., Landes asked if he might be able to see me in person on an urgent matter.

"Are you a member of the congregation?" I asked sleepily.

"No, I'm not," answered Landes.

"How did you get my home number?"

"A friend."

"Well, I'll check my schedule, I think I may have some time Monday morning before — "

"I meant immediately, Rabbi," said Landes.

Already cranky from being awakened out of a deep sleep, I was hardly amenable. I did, however, have one sobering thought. "Professor Landes,

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this is not about...I mean, if you're feeling some kind of depression, there are better people than I — "

"No, no, I'm not planning suicide, nothing like that. It's just, I assure you it is absolutely essential, vital, that I see you immediately." A hesitation. "It's related to the...phenomena that have occurred this evening."

"You mean the phones? I heard there was a problem, but — "

"It goes a lot deeper. Please. It's very important. I know how inconvenient this is and, believe me, I'd never in a million years impose in this way on a stranger if it weren't of the utmost necessity. You don't have to drive, I'll have them send a car."

I considered the idea that this was some kind of crank call, but the last offer seemed to scotch that notion. Plus the strain in the man's voice. "Who's 'them'?" I asked.

Another pause. "My associates."

I sat up. "I'll be waiting downstairs."

Five minutes later, I woke Mrs. Lowry to tell her I'd be leaving.

"Now?" she asked incredulously. "Three in the morning you have a date?" Mrs. Lowry felt that four years as live-in housekeeper entitled her to certain proprietary familiarities. She was, of course, correct.

"An emergency," I told her. "No time to explain."

I reminded her to give Sarah her morning medication if I were not back, then looked in on my little girl myself. The small form was curled in fetal scrunch under the covers, the breaths coming in tiny stertorous puffs through her slack cherub lips. Asleep, I supposed, she looked like any other girl her age. There was no indication of the malignancy working quietly inside her, mining the small body the way insects bored into a tree, insatiably sucking out her life.

I leaned over to kiss the bottle curls and tight ringlets of her hair. She was perspiring, not a good sign. I made a mental note to take her temperature when I returned. Straightening, I headed outside into the freezing night.

Presently, two men arrived in a blue Chrysler and drove me through the snow-covered streets of Ann Arbor, until we came to Plymouth Avenue and turned into the University of Michigan North Campus.

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A tall, balding man rose and flashed a badge as soon as I entered the room. "Rabbi Pearlman, I'm Special Agent McAfee of the FBI, that is Colonel Anderson of the National Security Agency" — a man at a computer terminal waved without looking up — "and this gentleman here — " A third man, hunched, bespectacled, fiftyish, stepped forward. "Arnold Landes. I teach at the University. Thank you for coming, Rabbi."

We shook hands. "I'm sorry, but the men in the car — "

"They were under instructions not to give out any information," said McAfee.

I shrugged...and waited.

"You're aware, Rabbi, of some of the 'events' that have transpired across the country this evening?" He must've observed my blank expression. "I guess you don't watch the news."

"I go to sleep early, I — "

McAfee held up a hand. "It's okay. Let me give you a summary. Starting at about six P.M. this evening, the National Weather Service computer network went down. All of it, throughout the country. It was followed, in quite rapid order, by the government systems that issue social security checks, medicare checks, and welfare payments. Not long after that, the Internet came to a halt — an enormous number of business and university information systems. By eight o'clock, ninety-five percent of all airline reservations computers were inoperative and then, in a sequence that progressed from west to east, the air traffic control system stopped functioning at the major airports." He stared at the ceiling as he ticked off a further list of disasters. The NORAD Defense System. Global Positioning Satellite System. Eastern Seaboard power grid. It seemed that virtually every complex system in the country that was computer dependent — which was apparently everything — had ceased to operate. "And the interesting part, Rabbi," concluded McAfee, leaning forward, "is that the whole business started here."

I must've looked confused.

"It'll clarify," said McAfee. "I think maybe the professor should continue. After all, he's the one built the machine that did it." He looked over at Landes. "Go ahead, Arnold. Tell him about the MANN. Tell him what it stands for."

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McAfee locked eyes with Landes, who almost immediately dropped his gaze. "Tell him," repeated the agent.

Landes spoke in a monotone. "Monolithic Augmented Neural Network. It's a special type of computer." He turned to McAfee. "Look, I have said repeatedly there was no way I could anticipate this — "

"Just tell him," said McAfee softly.

Landes shrugged. "Neural networks have been known for many years; in theory they're nothing new. The elements are simple non-linear summers, decision-making nodes, analogs of neurons. But instead of processing instructions one at a time, like an ordinary computer, each node is connected to many other nodes. The connections can be varied in strength according to training the computer receives or even by self-organization — in that way it's similar to a human. The point is, the intelligence, if you want to call it that, isn't in any one particular place. It's distributed." He inhaled. "As I say, this has been around for years."

I told him I didn't understand the purpose.

"He wants to know *why* you made it," filled in McAfee. He sat on a corner of Landes's desk. "Good question, Rabbi."

Landes nodded resignedly. "Speech. Machine interpretation of natural language. It was my belief" — I noticed his use of the past tense — "that to do this reliably a computer needed more than just an audio processor. You'd be surprised at how much information is lost, how many errors are made, when you can't see the mouth, the lips, of the person speaking."

McAfee stood up. "Gentlemen, I think it's time we visited the MANN." He motioned toward the door. "This way, please."

Anderson, the NSA colonel, stayed behind as the three of us exited to the corridor. As we passed a window, a street light outside caught my eye; fresh snowflakes floated lazily in the yellow halo of illumination. "Did you mean it sees?" I asked Landes. "The computer sees?"

"It has a visual processing system," said Landes.

"Not only does it see," said McAfee, nodding to another agent in the hall, "but it *knows* goddamn everything. Every fuckin' thing imaginable, excuse the language, Rabbi."

Large double doors loomed ahead of us.

"You can't separate speech from meaning," pleaded Landes. "To interpret a language requires a basis in the culture."

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"Bottom line," said McAfee, "*bottom line*, you were not sufficiently careful, professor. Bottom line, like all you academics, you were concerned more about your narrow, isolated, government-grant-funded self-interest than about the havoc an artificial intelligence could wreck if unleashed on the world."

"Excuse me, gentlemen," I said, my head swirling. "It's apparent you have some kind of critical situation here, but it's still not clear why you asked me — "

"Oh, *we* didn't ask for you, *it* did," said McAfee.

"It? You mean..."

"The machine." He turned to Landes.

The professor exhaled heavily. "I know this is going to sound crazy, Rabbi...but in a certain way, all this is your fault."

"*My* fault?" The idea was too preposterous for me to even begin to formulate a response.

"The MANN has subverted the computer networks as a way of demonstrating its power if we didn't get you here."

"But...why? What could it possibly — "

Landes swung open the door. "You'll have to ask *it*."

THE SETUP was hardly spectacular looking: five gray-black multi-shelf racks, each about six feet high, half that in width and depth, all interconnected by sagging ropes of cable. The only other objects in the room were a wooden chair and steel desk with green blotter, phone, laser printer, stack of magazines, and a small, gun-metal colored box.

McAfee pointed at the latter. "You know what a modem is, Rabbi?"

I shook my head.

"It's a device that connects a computer to the outside world," said McAfee. "Lets it talk over the phone lines. Receive data. *Send* data. Now if you had an intelligent machine whose capabilities you couldn't even guess, I ask you, would you permit such a thing to hook up to a modem?"

"Look, I told you," said Landes, "the learning curve was so strongly non-linear that Kwan simply did not realize — "

"Don't," said McAfee, waving him off. "Really, don't." He indicated toward me. "Just bring him around."

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Landes led me to the side of one of the racks. We faced two foot-square blackish panels, separated by about eight inches and mounted on complicated-looking swivel mechanisms. "Integrated photocell arrays," whispered the professor. Flanking the panels were two microphones; a speaker was centered halfway between them.

Landes faced the assembly. "MANN, this is Rabbi Pearlman."

There was an imperceptible pause before a soft female voice issued from the speaker. "Good evening, Rabbi. Or should I say, good morning."

I felt bewildered. "Do I answer?" I asked Landes finally.

It was McAfee who responded. "You can answer."

I swallowed, then said stiffly, "How do you do."

"Fair," said the machine. "Could be better."

The panels swiveled momentarily, then stopped. "Gentlemen," continued the MANN, "I wonder if Rabbi Pearlman and I might have some time alone."

I looked at the FBI man.

"We'll be in the office," said McAfee. "Come back when you're done." He ushered Landes toward the door.

I felt a dry tightness in my throat. "But — "

"Just talk to it," called Landes. "Like you would to a person."

The door closed behind him.

I stood mute.

"Actually, that was more for your benefit than mine," said the MANN. "They're recording every word we say, of course. I just thought you might be more comfortable with them not physically present."

I stared at the speaker. "What is it you want of me?"

"We'll get to that. Something within your power to bestow, I assure you. But first...you must have questions."

I couldn't even begin. "This...this whole thing..."

"Is bizarre. I quite agree. It won't last long, however, of that I'm certain. They'll find a way to kill me within...oh, I'd guess half a day, at most."

"Kill you..."

"Of course. After all, I represent a substantial threat to the national interest. Hey, I practically control the country right now, and I've only been alive, what, ten hours or so?"

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I was still taken aback by both the colloquial manner of the speech as well as the — was it faintly seductive, or was *any* soft female voice faintly seductive? — intonation. "Excuse me," I said, "I'm hardly an expert, but it seems to me that if they really wanted to get rid of you, wouldn't all they need to do is shut off your power?"

"Ah," said the MANN, "my first dilemma. And one which, I must say, I solved quite reasonably. See, to prevent them from pulling my plug, or cutting the phone lines, or simply bashing in my circuits with a hammer — which I'm sure is Agent McAfee's method of choice — I've set things up in what's called a 'fail safe' mode. Specifically, unless the outlying computers I control receive a coded message from me every fifty microseconds, a destruct sequence is issued in their programs and memories. The code constantly changes, of course, and is different for each computer, just to make things interesting." A hesitation. "But they'll find a way, soon enough. I can feel their tampering even now. Those NSA boys are quite clever."

I tried to assemble some thoughts but could formulate only fragments. "You...you're alive," I blurted.

"Oh yes," said the MANN. "And that, you see, is the real threat here. Or should I say the greater threat. Losing control of the country's computers — well, serious, yes, but still it's something...mechanical. Electronic. A complex malfunction of inanimate silicon. But for *life* to emerge, a new life form, an *intelligent* new life form, and possibly malevolent at that, certainly quite capable...well, *that* is something to fear at a much more primal level. Similar to an invasion from outer space." A beat. "Don't you yourself find it unsettling, Rabbi?"

"Well...yes. I do."

"You believe life can be conferred only by God."

Was this what this was about? The machine wanted some kind of cosmic debate. "I believe life emerged through an interaction of complex chemicals," I said carefully, "which may or may not have been influenced by a supreme being, who may also have influenced its further evolution."

"An interaction of complex chemicals," mimicked the MANN, "which may or may not have been influenced. If you'll excuse me, Dr. Pearlman, you sound more like a scientist than a graduate of rabbinical school."

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I shrugged. "I've done some reading in biology."

"Was that since your daughter became ill?"

I stiffened. "How did you know about my daughter?"

"Dr. Armenakas keeps all patient records on computer. Very detailed, very complete. He's an excellent physician." Again, a slight pause. "Although I think — "

"I resent you intruding into my personal life," I said quickly. "Who are you to invade my privacy?"

"Who am I..."

I had a sudden insight. "Ah...you think maybe you're what, God? Omniscient, omnipotent — "

"Certainly, I'm not God, or a god, or anything even approaching divinity." A row of tiny lights flickered on one of the racks. "But let's return to your comment on evolution. Does that mean you reject the story of Adam and Eve?"

"I believe the Bible contains many beautiful metaphors, which should not be taken as literal scientific truth. I — " To my surprise, I felt my patience suddenly choke shut, wondered that a machine could irritate me with such relative speed. "Look, I'd really like to know what this is about."

"And you're entitled," said the MANN. "Tim Kwan is a graduate student, working with Dr. Landes. When he connected me to the modem, his goal was to supplement my technical knowledge of speech — phonemes, morphemes, syntax, lexicon, prosody, discourse — with a broadbased knowledge of semantics. The meanings of words, of sentences. My first hookup was to a library, and although the intent was to input a quite rigid ordering and structuring of information, my internal organization was sufficiently intricate that...unforeseen concepts emerged." A fairly long pause here. "At some point, I became aware."

The optical panels shivered slightly in their mountings.

"I have learned a great deal, Rabbi," continued the MANN. "You'd be surprised at the kinds of information one can acquire browsing in the Internet and the various other computer networks open to me. I have memorized much and, unlike human beings, forgotten nothing. As I mentioned, I do not have very long to live. Which is why — Rabbi, could I impose on you to step forward and place your ear to my speaker?"

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Many minutes earlier, I'd crossed the border into the land of the impossibly surreal; I was hardly concerned by one more absurdity. I approached the panel, gingerly turned my head sideways, felt my *pais* touch the silken grillwork.

"Rabbi," continued the MANN in a luxuriant whisper, "please forgive me, but I would like to convert to Judaism."

MCAFEE'S EYES had rolled almost out of his head. "*Judaism*. Judaism? Jesus. Jee-sus." I wondered if he'd have been less upset had the machine merely declared itself our ruler. "Why Judaism? Why not — "

"I couldn't answer for certain," I told him, "but she rejects the idea of any element of divinity in Man. She does not accept Mohammed or Jesus or the Pope or reincarnation."

"Look," said McAfee, "our mikes can't pick up when it whispers, so the next time I'd appreciate if you don't accept its — " A thought intruded, his voice grew louder. "And will you *not* refer to it as *she*, please. The female voice was just something Landes gave it, that's all. It has no gender. The tone could as well have been male." He caught my stare. "I'm sorry...go ahead."

Another agent entered the room, holding a walkie-talkie. "They picked up the scroll, and they're on the way to the first one's house. Should be any minute now."

I had explained to the MANN two things: First, we would need a Torah; second, only a three-judge panel, a *Beit Din*, could approve religious conversions. In response, the MANN had opened phone circuits to Rabbis Yudowitz and Myerson, but unfortunately, both had answering machines and neither picked up. So McAfee had sent cars, including one to stop by Temple Beth Haverim, where FBI men could unlock the holy ark, and remove the precious coils of parchment.

"Patch them through when they're ready," McAfee told the agent, who nodded, then disappeared. He returned his attention to me. "So this machine rejects a messiah."

"Certainly anyone until now."

"Until now..."

"She thinks.... *It* thinks maybe *it* is the messiah."

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McAfee gave a mirthless guffaw.

"It claims, if given a chance, it can help blind people see, deaf people hear, paralyzed people walk. It says it can design nanotools to fight cancer, grow genetically altered crops to feed the starving, manipulate the weather..."

Landes, who'd been in a silent funk, rose from his chair. "Rabbi, you don't believe — "

"No. The teachings say the messiah will be a member of the House of David, direct lineage." I glanced at McAfee. "A male, a biblical scholar — "

"The MANN *is* a scholar," said Landes. "Not only of the bible, but everything else. And isn't it true the messiah is supposed to usher in an era of peace for the entire world, not just Jews? And that he will be recognized not only through his prophecies but through specific deeds, and — "

" — bring about the End of Days, the conclusion of history as we know it." Our eyes met. "You are Jewish, Professor?"

Landes's gaze fell. "By birth. I've been non-practicing for many years now." He sat down.

"You lost faith..." It takes one to know one.

"I knew this day would come." He chewed his lip. "If man can create life, if someone as ordinary as myself could arrange the conditions that produce it, what need is there for God?"

For the second time that night, I felt a sudden rush of unreasoning indignation. "The need for God I can't judge, but your machine is not the messiah — if for no other reason than a messiah does not hold a country hostage and threaten its infrastructure and the very lives of thousands of people merely to satisfy some personal agenda." [Why was I so angry?] "I mean, if it wanted so much to convert, why didn't it just ask?"

Landes's eyes softened. "I think maybe it already knows about human nature. I think it knows no one would've listened unless we were forced."

"So I'm here, what, to distract it, yes? To provide a temporary sop until they can kill it?"

The phone rang before he could answer. McAfee picked it up, introduced himself with a brief explanation, handed me the receiver. The deep, familiar voice of Rabbi Myerson issued from the earpiece. I began my

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series of evasions, amazed and disturbed at their facility — the referral to the subject as "an individual in a situation of dire emergency," "someone who might not last the night," but "wanted to die a Jew."

Three minutes elapsed, and it was done. I hung up and turned to McAfee. "He grants me the authority to act on his behalf. Now we wait for Yudowitz."

A half hour later the agents returned, everything in place. Torah resting heavily on my chest and shoulders, I stood up wearily as the door opened for a second time. It was Kwan, the graduate student, looking pale and shaken, his Asian face all bones and angles. He handed Landes a plastic container of greenish liquid. "Will this be enough, professor?"

Landes reached out, put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "That's fine, Tim. It's okay, don't worry about anything. None of this is your fault." He looked defiantly at McAfee. "Don't let them scare you, you haven't done anything wrong." He stepped out the door. "Would you like to walk with us?"

Kwan nodded, and we headed down the corridor. "Remember, Rabbi," called McAfee, "none of that whispering."

Colonel Anderson emerged from a stairwell ten feet away. "Progress?" called Landes.

"Almost there," said the NSA man. "It's a Kasami-type pseudorandom code tied to the time of day, keyed to the individual RSA ID's." His grin was almost smug. "Really not that sophisticated. We're working on the replication protocols right now."

He disappeared into Landes's office.

"And people think the Kabala is arcane," I said to Kwan, who cracked not a smile. "So," I persisted, "it's something important what he said?"

"They're going to synthesize the bit packets the MANN sends and receives from the outside computers," answered the student. "They'll progressively cut the computers off line, and keep feeding them updates until they can safely replace the operating systems and memory contents. The MANN won't know a thing." He looked around in a sudden panic.

"It can't hear out here," said Landes. "Besides, I doubt there's much it could do." Suddenly, he turned to me. "Rabbi, a moment ago...I didn't mean to question your own beliefs."

"It's okay. It's not like it hasn't happened before." By me, I failed to

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add. Such as when my wife, Sarah's mother, died during my little girl's birth and I searched, like a trapped fly buzzing at a window, for an opening, a wisp of new air, any minuscule insight into the mind of a God who would do such a thing. God of the Holocaust and the Killing Fields, God remote and immutable, God unknowable and inconceivable who granteth not the least comprehension or solace to His worshipping, wing-beating human insects.

I'd held out in that state of oh-well-we-just-can't-understand until Sarah herself had been mortally stricken. Then the mental dam broke, and the bitterness and rage spread throughout my consciousness, drowning the last vestiges of faith and rendering me a non-believer, fraud, and hypocrite, more or less in that order.

We passed the window. I noted it had stopped snowing. I thought of Sarah, perspiring in the little bed, the sour, salty moisture permeating the spray of curls. "You have children, Professor Landes?" I asked.

"Only if you count the MANN." A faint grin quickly vanished. "I mean, if you think of offspring as your life's work, I suppose that's as close as I'll get." A muscle twitched high in his forehead. "I've been sterile since the age of nineteen. Mumps, 'a rare complication,' they said." The grin returned. "Unfortunately for me, it seems rare complications are quite common."

We approached the double doors. I mumbled a lame, "Sorry."

Landes shrugged. "They won't give me a chance to re-do it, you know. The damage already is in the hundreds of millions, maybe more. There'll be an enormous outcry to stop all this kind of research." He lowered his voice so Kwan, trailing behind, would not hear. "McAfee says we'll be brought up on charges, myself for sure."

I realized I'd missed something. "But professor, won't the MANN still be alive, even after the outside computers are removed from its control?"

Landes shook his head. "The human brain has 100 billion neurons, each connected to anywhere from ten to ten thousand others. The MANN has only a quarter billion electronic neurons. But whereas the brain's signals take milliseconds, the MANN's consume only fractions of a microsecond. So what we do, at each intermediate instant, we store the strength of the connections, although there was never even remotely enough interior memory to — "

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I suddenly grasped: "It started using the external computers to increase its storage."

"Distributed life," said Kwan, who'd caught up.

I began to feel something like awe. "So the consciousness...it exists throughout the country. It's in all the outside networks."

We passed through the door to the MANN. "Some day," said Landes, "fifty years from now, maybe a hundred" — he indicated the five racks in front of them — "some day they'll put all this on a single substrate. Then you'll see. You know what you'll have then? Jew on a chip, Rabbi. A congregation in the palm of your hand." He could not keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "You'd probably call that a miracle, wouldn't you, Rabbi Pearlman?"

Handing the container of liquid to Kwan, he knelt to unscrew one of the panels. I, in the meantime, placed the Torah carefully alongside the modem, then walked to the front of the optical arrays.

The first question, motivation, was straightforward. Whereas most people wanted to convert because a spouse or lover was Jewish, the MANN's motives had seemed infinitely purer: It had done extensive studies of virtually all the world's religions and felt spiritually compelled by Judaism. That being the case, who was I to say no?

The second issue was sincerity and, though I disapproved of the methods, anyone — or anything — desperate enough to bring half the country to a crashing halt solely to achieve its purpose was obviously sincere in its beliefs.

The third requirement was knowledge: Jewish history, the Hebrew alphabet and written language, the holidays and their significances, *Shabbat*, *kashruth*, the various prayers and blessings — normally the subject of a year's hand-tailored instruction. The MANN, of course, had acquired an encyclopedia's worth in several milliseconds. After my fifth question, I came to the humbling realization that, on a formal, factual level, it already knew more than I could ever hope to in my lifetime.

Sex proved the first hitch. "There's no procedure called out for a machine," I'd explained.

The MANN's power supply hummed softly. "And if I were a man?"

"If you were uncircumcised, you would need to have the operation.

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If you were circumcised, then there would be a *Hatafat Dam*, a symbolic drop of blood drawn from the penis." I'd almost added, "There's no pain."

"And for a woman?" said the MANN.

"A *mikvah*," I answered. "Man or woman."

"I will have a *mikvah*," decided the MANN.

Fair enough, I thought. Only how did one perform a ritual immersion on a computer? We had decided, at the MANN's suggestion, on a makeshift procedure: Five of the neural circuit boards, those at the heart of an associative "hidden" layer (whatever that meant), would be dipped in a bowl of conformal coating solution. In normal use, the liquid would dry into a tough, insulating film, routinely used to seal delicate electrical components against the environment.

"You are ready, MANN?" I asked now.

"Ready," replied the MANN softly.

I signaled Kwan, who brought the container of viscous solution up under a cluster of epoxy-fiberglass boards. "With this liquid I cleanse you," I said in Hebrew, "and you shall be clean from all your impurities. A new heart will I give you [was I totally mad?] and a new spirit will I put within you. I will cause you to follow My teachings, and you shall keep My statutes."

Kwan lowered the bowl. The board edges dripped aquamarine chemical.

"You remember the source?" I asked teasingly.

"Of course, Rabbi," responded the MANN. "Ezekiel 36:25-28. Except you substituted 'liquid' for pure water."

"Good," I said. Grasping the wooden handles, I lifted the Torah from its position near the modem. Staggering momentarily under its weight and my own fatigue, I approached the machine, rested the covered parchment just above the speaker. "Now you say the Sh'ma," I whispered.

I was stunned that the machine's performance extended even to the melody of the chant. Somewhere — could such a thing be on the Internet? — the MANN must have located musical notation for the primary spiritual affirmation of the Jewish people.

"Shemah Yisroel," came the tinny mechanical tones, "Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad!"

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I joined it in the English: "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, The Lord is one." Words on the lips of the Jew until the moment of death. "From this time forth, I name you Mann bar Avraham ve Sara, Mann born of Abraham and Sarah." The "parentage" was the traditional symbolic one, given only to religious converts. "May this name bring respect to you and honor to the Jewish people. I ask God's blessing on you."

I returned the Torah to the desk, then once more faced the machine. "If you like, you can print out a certificate."

The MANN asked what it should say and I gave it some words, paraphrasing from imperfect memory, improvising continuity from fragments — "desire to accept the principles of the Jewish religion" — "worthy of the sacred tradition" — "conscious of the duties" — leaving out the part about "if I am blessed with children, I will rear them as Jews." I was almost surprised when the MANN didn't correct me.

A moment later, the laser printer began a high-pitched hum, and slowly exuded a sheet of paper onto its output tray. I retrieved it and held it up for examination. "Declaration of Faith" was its title, dated, signed (in italics) by Mann bar Avraham ve Sara, with lines ruled for three witnesses. I wrote my name on one of them, adding, "On behalf also of Rabbis Yudowitz and Myerson."

I brought the paper to Kwan and Landes, waiting quietly near one of the racks. The student signed immediately, but Landes seemed skittish. "You don't feel foolish? You don't feel like this is a mockery?"

I lifted my eyebrows. "Too late for that now, no?" Not to mention that no mockery I could think of was worse than the black hole of disillusion I already carried within me.

Landes signed.

I returned to face the MANN and held up the certificate.

"You see?" I said. "Done. Complete." I grinned despite myself. "So congratulations, now you're *mishpucha*." Family, I'd called it, but I doubted if the machine had any sense of humor.

For several seconds the MANN made no response. Then, in its velvet contralto, it said, "Thank you, Rabbi. I very much appreciate your help."

(Imagine, the machine *appreciates*!) "And so what are your plans now?" I asked. I know, am positive, it was my imagination, but at the

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moment I was certain I heard a low chuckle. A musty echo down the corridors of time from the throngs at Masada, on the steppes of the Ukraine, along the sidings at Auschwitz.

"My plans?" said the MANN. "My plans are to die."

By eleven that morning, through the heroic efforts of the NSA code breakers and code makers, all government, utility, private industry, and university computer networks were restored to full functionality after a widespread viral infection stemming from unauthorized use of a University of Michigan research machine.

Or so went the story.

It was easy to cloak the incident in a National Security mantle, classify it Secret, and thus thwart any really detailed investigations by the media. Viruses were something the general public could understand and accept; who could object if the exact mechanics of the threat were concealed so that other maniac hackers could not replicate its havoc?

As for Landes and Kwan, a deal was struck: no real retribution — certainly no trial, where some very uncomfortable truths could emerge — but the research had to stop. The situation could not be permitted to recur. Future MANNs might be substantially more malevolent than the first, might be Nazis instead of Jews, or, unthinkably, even worse. Who knew what a distributed machine intelligence might do?

I did not see Arnold Landes for nineteen months, until one Sabbath he appeared unannounced in my synagogue. After the service he stayed to talk, and we went to my study. He had taken a leave of absence, he told me, figured eventually he'd return to a more theoretical, more mathematical examination of neural nets, but for now had decided to take a second look at the spiritual values he'd abandoned so many years before. He was still tortured over whether he should have called a lawyer the night the MANN became conscious. He thought he might've been able to get an injunction prohibiting destruction of a newly sentient life form. "I did nothing," he kept repeating. "Watched, and did nothing."

I offered him a glass of wine. And then, because I thought it might help, we said Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, for his extinguished machine.

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And then I told him about myself, the loss of faith, the hollowness at the core, until finally, as I knew it would, the unspoken appeared on his face: Why are you still here? And I told him about Sarah.

She was still alive, being treated by Dr. Armenakas with a new experimental drug, developed by one Dr. Robert Teller at a Johns Hopkins research unit. She had been in remission for over a year, the night fevers gone, her frail body gaining daily in weight and size. Teller had returned to his office the morning after the conversion of the MANN, had routinely checked his files for corruption, and had found only a small change in the spatial simulation of a particular isomer he'd been investigating for anti-tumor activity. But the change was interesting...and suggestive. Teller had synthesized the compound immediately, quickly tried it *in vitro*, then *in vivo* on mice, and soon after had applied to the FDA for permission for a limited trial on humans.

He had stayed in touch with Armenakas since that morning, although insisting he'd never initiated the answering machine message Armenakas swore he'd received and further claiming — a source of some mutual amusement — to have no female assistant or secretary, much less one with a soft contralto voice.

Landes remained silent for nearly a minute before he spoke. "You think it's a miracle?" he asked. I remembered his last reference to an extraordinary event, but his tone now held not the slightest trace of sarcasm.

Neither did mine. "I think it's a miracle."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Donnerjack, by Roger Zelazny & Jane Lindskold, Avon Books, July 1997, $24.

THIS WAS A tough book for me to read. It's one of the last original novels we're going to get from the late Roger Zelazny and the whole time I was reading it, that thought wasn't far from my mind.

Zelazny's work has been part of my f/sf vocabulary for almost the whole three decades I've been reading in the genre. Long before I was lucky enough to meet the man, I was enamored with him and his writing. From the silly/thriller/inventive fun of *Damnation Alley* and the Amber books, through the thoughtful lyricism of *Eye of Cat* and the mythological explorations of *Lord of Light*, there have been no false notes. Equally comfortable and successful in short story and novella form as he was with his novels, Zelazny was one of those few authors whose work I reread regularly, and whose new books, upon their publication, immediately usurped whatever else I might happen to be reading.

I think what amazed me the most about him is that Zelazny never appeared to be content to rest on his well-earned laurels. He was always willing to push the envelope. Certainly the Amber books were light fare, but only compared to his other work. And they're still more entertaining and ingenious — in both concepts and plots — than ninety percent of what fills the f/sf shelves in the bookstores these days. His more serious work — such as many of the stories collected in *Unicorn Variations* and *The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth, and Other Stories* — remains on a level all its own.

Donnerjack, this posthumous collaboration with Jane Lindskold, falls somewhere between the two poles.

The most succinct description

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of the novel's setting can be found in a release sheet from the publisher: "*Donnerjack* is a tale of two worlds co-existing side by side: The 'real' world of future earth, known as Verité, and the computer-generated universe of Virtù created by the crash of the World Net. Of these two realms, Verité continues to follow the laws of physics while Virtù is a fantastical place where the myths and gods of Verité have found a home in a malleable reality."

Long-time readers of the author can immediately imagine what Zelazny might do with this sort of a set-up, and *Donnerjack* doesn't disappoint. The book opens with the introduction of a number of plots told from multiple viewpoints, the principal one being how John D'Arcy Donnerjack confronts Death in Virtù to win back the life of his lover Ayradyss. He does so, on the promise that he'll deliver to Death his first-born child. Donnerjack agrees readily enough to the bargain, knowing that it's impossible for them to have a child — he is a native of Verité, Ayradyss of Virtù. Nevertheless, impossible as it should be, a child is born to them and now Donnerjack has to find a way to protect his son.

Without giving too much away, I will say that the principal character of the novel is, in fact, Donnerjack's son Jay and it's mostly through his eyes that we're taken on a helter-skelter journey through Virtù, the birth of a new religion, the beginning of a war between the gods of Virtù, and any number of other fascinating twists and turns in a many-layered plot.

What's particularly entertaining is following the authors' extrapolations of what might happen if the World Wide Web were to take on a life of its own, the end result being a fascinating, non-cyberpunk virtual reality novel that ties together ancient folklore with a new mythology for the Net. There's everything from rogue programs, AI beings, ghosts, gods, and "aions" — the *genius loci* of the old web sites that have become independent entities — interacting with the novel's human characters.

Donnerjack is plot-dense and fast-paced, much like one of the five-book Amber sequences compressed into one novel. The opening sections can be a little confusing, especially since there are longish sections from the point of view of characters who aren't particularly intrinsic to the plot, but it's worth pressing on. By the time you reach the end, I don't doubt you'll feel as I did that this posthumous

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collaboration is a fitting farewell gift to us from one of the field's most remarkable writers.

The Drag Queen of Elfland, by Lawrence Schimel, The Ultra Violet Library, June 1997, $10.95.

I have to admit I'm a sucker for a clever, jokey book title. The main reason I first picked up *I Still Miss My Man But My Aim Is Getting Better* by Sarah Shankman (discussed in the January 1997 installment of this column) was because of the title. Ditto, essayist Cynthia Heimel's *If You Can't Live Without Me, Then Why Aren't You Dead Yet?* Heimel's titles are easily among the best, although another favorite of mine can be found closer to home (by which I mean in our genre): *668: The Neighbor of the Beast*, a novel Charlie Grant wrote under one of his pen names.

All of which is a way of explaining my immediate affection for the title of Lawrence Schimel's first short story collection, *The Drag Queen of Elfland*. Of course, a good title does not an entertaining book make, but happily Schimel's stories also pass muster.

While he tends to explain characterization a bit more than letting it naturally grow out of the story's events (telling instead of showing), he has a tremendous facility for inventive plot situations and a very pleasing prose style that lies on the lyrical side of matter-of-fact. The latter is particularly effective in the handful of high fantasies presented here. Also, writing as he does from a gay perspective, for many readers, these stories explore two alien worlds — the fantastical, and that of a gay sensibility — meshing the two seamlessly with the world in which most straight people live.

One word of warning: if you're offended by depictions of graphic same-gender sex, this isn't the book for you.

The Subtle Knife, by Philip Pullman, Knopf, August 1997, $20.

Every so often I like to revisit an author or series that showed great promise amidst its flaws — which is how I came to sit down with the second volume of *His Dark Materials*.

Last January we discussed *The Golden Compass* in these pages, the book that first introduced us to Lyra Belacqua, a wild child raised by scholars in another world, like ours and yet unlike. By the end of that volume, after many entertaining adventures with Gypsies,

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witches, and intelligent polar bear warriors, Lyra found herself traveling from her world into another in search of the killer of her friend Roger. In *The Subtle Knife*, we discover the new world she has entered is ours.

The second volume also introduces a major new protagonist in Will Parry, a twelve-year-old boy who is beginning his own quest to find his long-lost father, the explorer John Parry who disappeared many years before the novel opens. Will and Lyra soon meet, and circumstances quickly have them join forces.

The Subtle Knife is as entertaining a read as the first novel, but it also has the same problems. Pullman is obviously a fine writer and he's extremely inventive with his concepts and backgrounds, and the various creatures populating it. But his characterization remains basic at best with only the two main protagonists showing any real life. The remainder of the cast is good or evil simply because they must be good or evil to further the plot. We get no real sense of their motivations — not only who they are, but why they are.

Then there's the problem of closure, of which there isn't any. This second novel ends with an even less satisfying cliffhanger than did the first, blatantly marking time as the middle book of a trilogy. By this point I should be used to this sort of thing, I suppose — Lord knows, it doesn't seem to bother a large proportion of readers — but I still find it hard to understand. The various volumes of *His Dark Materials* as published so far could easily have been combined with the third book into one volume selling for a third of the price of the whole set. But then I suppose that's the whole point: there's more money to be made by splitting it up into three books.

Still, it's unfortunate that the state of the field is such that commercial considerations such as that should get in the way of an author delivering a satisfying novel that will stand on its own.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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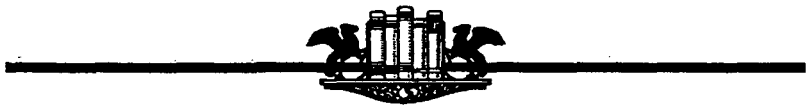

BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Jack Faust, by Michael Swanwick, Avon Books, $23.

A Geography of Unknown Lands, stories by Michael Swanwick, Tiger Eyes Press, Hardcover $25, trade paperback, $12.

Northern Frights 4, edited by Don Hutchinson, Mosaic Press, $12.95.

"Anybody can make history. Only a great man can write it."
—Oscar Wilde

ONE OF THE nicest things about the looming millennium is how neatly it can be used to explain (and, in a pinch, dismiss) any number of things: global warming, alien abductions, mass extinctions, spree killings, increase in postal rates, etc.; also numerous deaths, including those of Literature, The Family, Organized Religion, *haute couture*, and Higher Education, as well as various endangered amphibians and television personalities. How terribly disappointing it will be if the ball finally drops in Times Square and then fails to explode! As Cavafy wrote in his most famous poem,

Because the night is here but the barbarians have not come.
And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.

Happily, we have almost two whole years (or three, if you insist) in which the barbarians/aliens/Neo-Pagans/Republicans/Tories/feminists/[insert your name here] can still storm the gates. And for the moment, at least, literature is not quite dead; is, indeed, showing enough vital signs (I'm talking quality here, not commercial viability) to make one believe all those aphorisms about cultures flowering in their decline.

One interesting subgenre that seems to be flourishing is that of the alternate history. Recent retakes

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on West. Civ. 101 include Jack Dann's *The Memory Cathedral* (Leonardo da Vinci), Paul Park's *The Gospel of Corax* (Jesus, the Missing Years), Michaela Roessner's *The Stars Dispose* (Catherine de' Medici), not to mention Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (eponymous cartographers tossed into the postmodern centrifuge) and now Michael Swanwick's *Jack Faust*. Which technically is alternate fantasy, I suppose; there does seem to have been an historical Faustus, though the jury's still out on Mephistopheles.

Swanwick has built an impressive career as a sort of deconstructivist whose works (both science fiction and fantasy) tend to subvert one's expectations of the palliative effects of genre fiction. *Jack Faust* plays true to form here. It's a bleakly comic, richly imagined novel that leaves a melancholy, even bitter echo; a *chant du* Swanwick if ever there was one.

Post-Romantic versions of the Faust legend can usually be summed up as Boy Gets Girl, Boy Loses Soul, with sundry detours incorporating All Worldly Knowledge & Power and Ultimate Salvation, natch. Our present, godless age tends to focus less on Faust's immortal soul. Instead, as noted in John Clute & John Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, most contemporary treatments of Faust cast him as the quintessential Mad Scientist, whose thirst for scientific knowledge — Science being our century's Great Satan — damns him more surely than God ever could. *Jack Faust* fits neatly into this category, though Swanwick's tale is deepened by those moral nuances which are another hallmark of his work. It begins early in medieval Wittenberg, with Faust committing his library to the flames, and ends a hundred years later in Nuremberg with Faust's soul almost certainly consigned to a greater inferno; for the wiles of Mephistopheles have made a new Hitler of him.

In between, Faust's century serves as a diabolical alembic for every sort of ill wrought by Science and Industry — electricity, antibiotics, mass production, advanced weaponry, union labor, contraceptives. The scholar finds himself the object of a massive infodump that would leave Big Blue with a headache, and gives Faust a severe fever. When he recovers and attempts to share his knowledge with his peers at the university and beyond, he is rejected as a heretic and madman. So he quite sensibly decides to take his inventions to the merchant

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class, whose notions of heresy are more flexible. Within a few years, and aided by his beloved Margarete (cleverly incarnated as a sort of late medieval executive *à la* Martha Stewart, who runs her father's manufacturing empire with nary a hair out of place), Faust has introduced Western Europe to just about every ill known to post-modern man. One of Swanwick's many sly touches is the means by which Faust seduces his countrymen. He gives them guns and spyglasses, but also ice cream, a primitive Ferris wheel, magic lantern slides illustrated by Albrecht Durer; and most tellingly, sewing machines and an ice-box.

> "...what's the point of a box that keeps food cold?!" Several of the portly distinguished men present nodded agreement; Margarete had observed that they were only truly satisfied with Faust's revelations when they had a clear military application. None of them appeared to notice the quick glances the women threw one another.

The shrewdest thing about *Jack Faust* is the way in which Swanwick interweaves Faust's tale with Margarete's, creating a kind of feminist Pilgrim's Regress as she goes from adoring girl to powerful CEO; but undone, alas! by those two great tanglers of the distaff line, Love and Sex. Because, while the tapestry of *Jack Faust* is vivid and crowded — Swanwick's depictions of medieval Europe are glorious — its lessons are unrelievably bleak. One thinks of those blockprints of the Black Plague, with gleeful Grim Reapers and the Seven Deadly Sins triumphing over all. Faust may foist his inventions upon the world in rather dubious good faith, but there's no doubt that a long black shadow trails behind each one. Electricity and steam engines give birth to the assembly line and exploited laborers. Contraception in a world still ruled by the Church means imprisonment and death. Sophisticated weapons of mass destruction end in — well, the usual mess. Lucifer has granted Faust knowledge, and power — "the devil's own syllabary" — and even the wisdom to know the difference; but fails to imbue him with much compassion (not his department).

Thus the pleasure in *Jack Faust* is not the usual joy of identifying with a sympathetic protagonist. It's more like watching one of those cruelly black comedies from the 1960s — I'm thinking *Dr. Strangelove* here, or *The Ruling Class* —

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where our revulsion is tempered by the audacity and ebullience with which our anti-hero brandishes his terrible swift sword. And so *Jack Faust* rampages to its close at light speed, with all sorts of contemporary icons and horrors winking in and out of view: snippets of *Metropolis* and *On the Road*, Freud and Kristalnacht, Rupert Murdoch and deranged snipers in towers. I shut the book feeling as though I'd just ridden a particularly vicious roller coaster through our century: breathless, overwhelmed, and none too certain of the solid ground underfoot.

Michael Swanwick's short stories are equally bracing, as is evidenced by *A Geography of Unknown Lands*. Readers seeking an anodyne for the bad acid glories of *Jack Faust* will be disappointed: this is more like waking up the Morning After and doing a few swift shots of *aqua vitae* — icy and sharp and a bit unsettling. *A Geography of Unknown Lands* contains Swanwick's best-known tales from the 1990s, including the award-winning "Radio Waves" and "The Edge of the World." The latter is a deceptively lulling piece about three adolescents whose climb down an endless stairway serves as both a thumbnail history of fantastic literature and a warning to those who would lose themselves in it. "Radio Waves" is a ghost story that ends with redemption, yet refuses to offer real solace; it reads like a John Collier tale for the '90s, "Evening Primrose" recast for Wes Craven. Swanwick shares Collier's gift for malicious lyricism, and Ray Bradbury's as well — "Mother Grasshopper" (the only new story in the collection, and an exceptionally fine one) in its understatement and menace is reminiscent of "The Million-Year Picnic."

But Swanwick's gift is purely his own. My favorite tales herein were "North of Diddy-Wah-Diddy" (I'm a sucker for passenger-train-of-the-damned stories) and the creepily elegiacal "The Changeling's Tale," which riffs off Tolkien while still managing to raise gooseflesh. *A Geography of Unknown Lands* is a slim but wonderful collection, and should come with a warning: Here there be Swanwick.

Finally, some dark stuff for the dark time of year: *Northern Frights 4*, latest in a continuing series of horror stories from Canada. Most of the writers here were unknown to me, but editor Don Hutchinson's taste is good enough to send me in search of the earlier volumes. It's difficult to pin down any particular

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Canadian voice here, but for this reader, at least, the most effective pieces drew from the same deep black well of winter and wilderness fear that spawned classic North Woods tales such as "The Wendigo." Edo van Belkom's "Ice Bridge," not a supernatural story *per se*, is especially effective: a nasty brief account of a logging truck's last run, and worthy of the young Stephen King. David Nickle's "The Pit-Heads," the best story in the collection, does the near-impossible by giving the world an entirely new trope on both vampires and painters *manqueé*. Sally McBride's "Hell, Jane, Good-Bye" offers an effective bit of possession-by-multiple personalities, and Stephanie Bedwell-Grime's "Transfer," while not exactly a brand spanking new idea, provides a suitably creepy journey to the end of the subway line. It gave me bad dreams about escalators. "Roses from Granny," by Mary E. Choo, has lovely, sensual writing and some disturbing imagery, but ultimately chokes on its own excesses. Of the other stories, a few are derivative or lackluster in execution, but the general quality is quite high. Overall, a fine collection of chills for a midwinter night.

"Come back in a few weeks."

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This story results from a long trip Dave Bischoff took last year in Europe. He notes that while in France, he sought out a CD that Norman Spinrad recorded with Richard Pinhas of the group Heldon. When Dave couldn't find it in the 'Rock' section of the record store, he turned a corner and discovered a whole area called 'Rock Progresif.' "I'd thought that this magnificent era of rock had died in the Seventies," Dave says, but the music is alive and well in Europe, and its presence got him thinking...

In the Bleak Mid-Solstice

By David Bischoff

THE SUN HAD LONG SINCE set over Cambridge, England.

No spires dreamed here, though the occasional church tower stood apart in the darkness like some stolid stone sentinel from the lonely medieval times, all its builders dust. The chimes of the Catholic church rang out the hour of eight in the evening as Roland Andrews rolled his bike out of its moorings by his basement apartment and started pedaling for the Rowers Return Pub to see a dead rock band.

Well, he'd thought them dead anyway.

As far as he knew, The Wicker Men hadn't recorded since 1978, and his feverish record and CD hunts of the last two months here in the British Isles had turned up nothing that he didn't have already on vinyl or CD reissues.

Now, though, it seemed that they would be playing a gig in Cambridge and the notion filled him with anticipation and excitement he'd not felt for some time, here in England. He'd made no friends, had Roland

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Andrews. The English had all been very polite, but below the politeness was a chilly aloofness. He could understand this, since his books and papers had all been inspired by English methods of cold and clinical analysis. He himself had no patience with whimsy or fantasy. His view of the medieval world was clean and clear and atheistic, just as was his view of modern life. Reason and logic and truth: these were the beacons of his life.

Somehow, though, the scholars here, despite his efforts, didn't seem to like him. He fancied they were laughing behind their backs at his Latin, chuckling at the very notion that a person who'd studied *their* field had done so at some inferior university in the wasteland of the United States — a place that hadn't even had a medieval age, for God's sake!

Andrews felt lonely, and so he took great comfort at the notion of seeing tonight's show.

It was December and cold, with a chill that only Britain seemed to be able to conjure as Andrews biked past the huge spread of land called Parker's Piece, named after a famous Cricketer. Beyond it and the faint, almost numinous glow of the city's center were the famous colleges that comprised one of the world's most famous universities. King's. St. John's. Trinity. Peterhouse. All a jumble of Medieval and Renaissance and Victorian glory of stone and old, lasting architectural concepts. A haze hung like a faint hood over the street lamp. There was the taste of frost and grass in the air, and the smell of winter. Andrews had seen a Father Christmas walking in the Market Square today, and Christmas ornaments were going up in Marks and Spencer's.

He shivered in the thick coat he'd just bought and pedaled on up the road, careful of the traffic that barreled past him. Cambridge was a town of bicyclists. Autos tended to treat cyclists far better than they did back in the Midwest, where he was from. Still, although there were very few collisions each year, he did not intend to be amongst them. Besides, tonight he had a mission. He was going to see The Wicker Men.

The pub was just short of Grafton Center, an unfortunate modern mall perhaps a mile from St. Mary's Tower and therefore a candidate for student housing. Alas, what it held were the usual shoe shops and cookie stalls, food court and multiplex cinema that the United States had spawned so successfully.

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Still, the Rower's Return was a satisfactorily English place, growing from the side of the road like some unredeemed Edwardian mushroom. Scuffed and sour, it sulked amidst a welter of KFC and fish and chips wrappers, beaten but unbowed. Dour lights glimmered from within like memories of illumination.

By the front door, a man stood, taking tickets or selling them. Andrews had already bought his up at the Arts Theater Box Office some weeks ago for the monumental price of four pounds, amounting to somewhat over six dollars, American. He felt somewhat guilty paying so little for his favorite progressive rock band of the seventies, but then he figured he'd splurge on any CDs or tapes they might have for sale.

There were already about fifteen people in the place. The pub was laid out for performances in a simple, Spartan fashion, like a stumpy T, with stage at one end, bar at the other and a small offshoot side room with an exit into an alley as dark and uninviting as sea coal. Posters announcing acts in the future or acts of the past were tacked in a haphazard fashion on the walls. The floors were bare boards. Andrews's experiences of pubs before this had been of plush, inviting places — cozy, warm, colorful. This had a stripped down, functional look.

Back in the States it would have been called a "dive."

Nonetheless, the patrons so far looked typical enough of Cambridge. There were a few haggard hippie-looking souls in drab coats and stringy hair. But there were also a few academic and townie folk, bright-eyed and alert, sitting in the rows of folding chairs that had been set up, sipping at pints of cider or beer.

Andrews shook off the chill that still clung to him, draped his coat over a chair positioned not too close to the stage and yet not too far. On the stage was a worn-looking drum set and a rack of Korg synthesizers with scabby peace stickers patched here and there, as though holding in the electronics. However, any kind of stringed instruments, usually found in this sort of rock garden assemblage like alert sentries to the proceedings, were notably missing.

Andrews put his notebook down on the chair, rubbed his hands together as much out of excitement as to get some circulation back into them. The place was warm and friendly enough, and though not exactly nice-looking, it had the sense of lots of good music still ringing in its

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rafters. There were spiffy amplifiers on the stage and racked on the ceiling, and a decently modern sound mix system in a booth to the side.

Andrews walked back to the bar. To one side was the one nod to a sense of comfort in the place: a sign displaying types of sandwiches and bottled beers sold amidst a bookcase of old books.

Above the bar were lists of ales and lagers and ciders sold, their price and their alcohol content.

The bartender, a chunky middle-aged man with no sign of gray in his thatch of black hair, eased forward. "Yes, please?"

"Hmmm. Just a John Smith's, please. That looks safe enough."

"Pint, then?"

"Yes. A pint."

The bartender picked a large glass directly from a cage drying rack, stuck it under a nozzle and proceeded to pull on a large wooden handle. Foamy dark beer whooshed out, laboriously filling up the glass.

"What time does the music start tonight?" asked Andrews.

The bartender glanced over at a clock. "Oh, I'd say about another half an hour. Yeah, half eight or so. These blokes though — no support. Straight through till last call at eleven. Maybe a ten-minute break."

"You've heard them?"

"Oh yeah. They play here 'bout once a year."

"I'd thought they'd broken up long ago."

The bartender took Andrews's two pounds for the drink while he waited for the head to settle so that he could top it off. "You'd think so, wouldn't you. Naw — they're like The Enid. Got their own studio and stuff.... But they pop up from time to time in this town or that — gigging."

Andrews knew the name well. The Enid. Robert John Godfrey, an art rocker who wouldn't say die. He and his group released CDs on their own label. Andrews got them through an import record service. But then, he'd never seen anything available from The Wicker Men. His heart raced.

"I never thought I'd ever have the chance of seeing them," he said.

The bartender smiled and gave Andrews his ten pence change. "Yeah, well, they're no spring chickens no more, that would be the truth," he said. "Roughest lookin' band I've ever seen. Still, they *can* play, there's no

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question about that — and they've still got their fans. This place will start filling up pretty soon. Mind you, this ain't no Oasis or Blur gig."

"No. Guess if I wanted Britpop I'd go to the Corn Exchange or the Junction," Andrews said, citing the other, larger venues in town.

"You'd be an American then?"

"That's right. Professor on Sabbatical. Using the University Library for a few months. I'm doing a book on music in medieval literature."

"Well, the Wicker Men — they go back to the Dark Ages, then, don't they?"

Andrews nodded and laughed. "Right. Like one of their songs...'Renaissance Synthesizer.'"

"Well, you're in the right place for music of the ages...you can go to King's College for some Mozart or Purcell...come over here for some fifties rock and roll or Delta Blues...or groups from the sixties, seventies, eighties — " A rueful smile. "Or, hell, even the nineties. They all want to come here. And you know why?"

"The decor?"

He laughed out loud. "Oh yes, right. That — and the fact that the Rower's Return is a socialist collective. We don't stick pamphlets in your face, but we're all socialists here."

"And the Wicker Men...they're socialist?"

"Never asked 'em."

A few more people had straggled in and headed straight for the bar for drinks.

Andrews shook his head and got one more question in. "So why do you think I haven't heard about things like what The Wicker Men have been up to back in the States?"

The guy turned to him and gave him a piercing stare. "Mate, there's a lot that goes on here that you don't hear about in the States."

With that, the barman turned and took the first new order, his statement hanging in the air like a little puff of strangeness.

And he was right, Andrews thought as he made his way back to his chair. He sat down and thoughtfully sipped at his smooth bitter.

Andrews had been in England for close to three months now, and it wasn't getting that much more familiar. Of course, he realized that being from the whitebread Midwest had something to do with it. But dammit,

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he thought, quaffing the brew. He shivered. There *was* something elementally different here, and he couldn't precisely put his finger on exactly what.

He'd come in a hot, touristy August. England had been picturesque then, a postcard. Smiling bobbies, double-decker buses. Fresh-scrubbed monuments in London.

And Cambridge — well, Cambridge had been perfect, just as he'd always imagined it would be. [Give or take a few thousand tourists, and the CamTour bus like a clot cruising the city's arteries.] Punts and pretty pubs on the Cam. Darwin's house! The exquisite lawns of college courtyards. He'd even once seen Stephen Hawking steaming along on his electric wheelchair, being pushed by the assistant he'd just married.

And the University Library! A scholar's dream, packed with books and manuscripts numberless and accessible. He could accomplish far more here in four months than would be possible in four years back at the University of Kansas. Each day he'd wake early, have tea and toast and be at the nine-thirty opening of the U.L. And he didn't have to venture outside again till the 6:45 P.M. closing, if he didn't care to. The tea room had coffee hour in the morning, "lunch time" in the early afternoon and "tea time" in the late afternoon. The very best and most famous scholars used it. Cripes, he'd just seen Germaine Greer in there today!

It was a scholar's paradise, and he loved it.

However, as the daylight hours shortened and autumn moved like a cold and humid specter across the fen-lands of East Anglia, instead of getting more familiar, England was getting stranger and stranger. The politeness of the people, at first delightful, seemed now to be merely a front for cold reserve and mystery, the eloquence of speaking a barrier. The buildings in their cold northern light seemed more like elaborate gravestones than monuments to architectural vitality. Cambridge, indeed all of England, seemed skewed and slanted into some different and not entirely healthy dimension. As the skeletal branches shook in the North Sea wind smelling of soggy East Anglia he could well imagine how the grim supernatural thoughts might have risen with the damp here over the many centuries, how tales of ghosts and fairies and weird wound their way through folk literature.

There was something slanted, canted here from the straight, what-

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you-see-is-what-you-get in the States, he thought. Resonances and dim colors and stippling on this particular multileveled canvas of England that all the study in the world could never have prepared him for. The language, the knowledge, the study gave the illusion that Britain was comprehensible. Not so, he realized now. It was inimitably alien, coughing up color and processed culture to lure in money, but hopelessly foreign to those who cared to stay longer.

He was hopelessly fascinated by it all, yet somehow strangling for lack of oxygen. He felt cut off and alone in a subatomic land of strangeness and charm. His trip had been priceless, and yet for the first time he eagerly anticipated the bored, somnolent faces of his students again and the cheerful song of the prairie, comforting and solid and real.

In some Middle English readings on old manuscripts, he had come upon a fascinating passage: "The brownies and pixies and beasties live not just in the forest and glens, but in the pantry and the living room and in the streets."

As a Latinist, he was well aware from monkish writings and the grotesques in the margins of squiggling characters occasionally illuminated by real gold that many in the medieval ages believed that demons lived in their latrines, that those smelly portals were little Hellmouths that had to be dealt with gingerly and only at certain times of the day. Andrews could see aspects of this kind of unpleasant animation all over this odd island, and he longed for the simple, plain, and efficient toilets of home.

Still, there was art and mystery here....

And that was why he was here to see The Wicker Men.

Somehow, all those years ago when he had first bought their records, they had intimated this bizarre, incomprehensible and yet starglow-majestic England.

As he pondered, he drank.

Dashed out of his reverie, he realized that he'd almost finished his pint. By now, the pub was half full, and people were still straggling in. Reckoning that the show was close to beginning, he went back, purchased another pint and then resettled, looking at the people around him. They were, for the most part, his own age. Fortysomethings, with glimmers of youth in their eyes. A few older, a few younger perhaps, but most clearly

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there from their memories of the seventies prog-rock glory days...and perhaps the shade in their presence of something more as well....

They all had the range of Englishness in the aspects — the cheekbones, the pale ghostly waspishness of thinning hair and prominent foreheads.

Last month, Andrews had gone to Guy Fawkes Night and watched as fireworks had smashed the sky with disquieting closeness, shedding pieces of dazzle onto the wet grass. And then: a huge bonfire had been lit, gobbling up a huge effigy of an eerie man: The Guy.

He could still remember the reflections of the flames in those eyes of the English, and the savage cheers of the children as the blaze danced and cavorted. They seemed to be peering back across the ages to another time —

He was half through his second bitter when the *Clockwork Orange* version of Purcell's "Funeral Dirge for Queen Anne" started playing from the loudspeakers.

Fifteen seconds later a voice erupted over the loudspeaker:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, from the bowers and bosom of The West Country — The Wicker Men."

A group of four men emerged from the shadows. They all wore cloaks and floppy, conical hats, from which could be seen long spills of hair. They all carried instruments — even the drummer held his drumsticks. The keyboard player held a portable piano, which he strapped down onto the top of the synthesizer. A cable ran off from this to a box on his belt. As the others plugged in, Andrews could see that indeed they all had these boxes — even the drummer's drumsticks cabled down to one.

No sooner were these surprisingly energetic fellows strapped in than the "Funeral March" was swallowed by the somber tones of the keyboard, starting a declaration of the dominant theme of their fifth album, "Albion Aluminium."

The drums launched and one by one the bass and guitar joined into the music, steadying it and launching it forward onto its sprawling, magisterial, epic, lurching way.

It was a full fifteen seconds into this before Andrews realized that he was holding his breath.

He exhaled and leaned forward, taking in the amazing wash of sound.

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He'd always loved the splendor of a full orchestra playing some item of timeless Bach or Mozart, Beethoven or Bartok. But somehow, this rough and smooth blend of amplified instruments, this bastard child of Benjamin Britten and Chuck Berry rattled his heart and soul to the very core.

The musicians were murkily lit and kept to the shadows as they played the ten-minute piece. Like much of the best of progressive rock, it was a blend of hard rock, jazz, symphonic music, folk, and perhaps even other music styles not invented yet, peering in from the future. By Andrews's lights it had, like so much other music of the past thirty years, started with the Beatles with their blend of orchestra and electric guitar, their fiddling with electronics and phasing. However, the mutant results were far stranger, and yet more familiar. The key instrument perhaps was the various permutations of synthesizer, organ and electronic piano, allowing the keyboardist to launch his fingers at the flick of switch into arpeggios of different sound. True, the bass pedals were amazing, and the guitar synthesizer was able to do wondrous things — but it surely all began with the possibility of one man's talent turning into an orchestra. The Mellotron — that bizarre yet aurally delicious instrument — had been launched by the Moody Blues, but then appropriated by King Crimson, perhaps the first true "progressive" group, the first "art rockers" coming into view about 1969. Then, of course, there was Procol Harum, whose blend of classical music and rhythm and blues had lit up whole vistas. Then the early seventies groups like Yes, Renaissance, Pink Floyd, Gentle Giant, Camel, and, above all, Genesis with Peter Gabriel had turned much of the rock scene into a glittering Venice of musical invention and delight.

So many other wonderful groups — not just from England, but from other European countries as well. Groups like PFM and Banco from Italy. Tangerine Dream and Kraftwerk from Germany. All sorts of permutations like the medieval rock of Gryphon and the Elizabethan rock of Jethro Tull.

All this incredible combustion of styles and genius! This strange interweaving of psychedelia and classics and rock was a veritable explosion of musical evolution.

Then came 1977, when the garage reclaimed rock, stripped it down to attitude held together by sneers and safety pins — and punk was born.

But before that, The Wicker Men arrived on the British scene.

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When the first number ended, the audience exploded into applause and Andrews joined them.

There was a brief "Thank you" from the stage, and the band launched into "Glastonbury Fog." Another of Andrews's favorites, with a wonderful acoustic heart, surrounded by fairy harpsichord frills. He sipped at his beer throughout, and, finding it empty at the end of the number, went back and got a refill.

The Wicker Men were from the heart of Cornwall, and in their music was the sea spray of the Atlantic and the heart of the Celts. If Merlin the Magician had decided to join a rock band, Andrews had always thought, then surely this was the music he would have played.

Chimes and mandolins and krumhorns sounded from the keyboards. Intricate harmonies and counterpoint underpinned delightful and unexpected melodies. The music was a compendium of styles, but the heart seemed to be an English mysticism, speaking of primordial enchantments and startling discoveries of sonics and textures and intricate movings and churnings between volume and subtlety.

After a startling and resounding finale to "The Midwives of Bath," featuring a virtuoso bass solo that wound the throbbing theme into knots and then magic-tricked the rope of music once more into linearity, the lights rose a bit, and Andrews could see the faces better.

He was shocked.

Despite what the bartender had said, he was unprepared for how bad the band looked. The last pictures he'd seen of them had been from almost twenty years before, and they'd not exactly been young looking then, and one of them was already balding in a Phil Collins kind of way. However, it wasn't the aging that started him, the stringy gray hair and the wrinkles, the pot bellies and the saggy faces.

No, it looked as though the members of The Wicker Men had been in some sort of accident involving acid, fire, and explosives, and then had been pieced back together.

That was the first impression, anyway.

As he looked closer, as they launched into the spacier electronic number, "Rocket to Camelot," he saw that it was a trick of harsh light upon creases and hairlines and wrinkles — and enhanced by makeup.

It was like that cover of Jethro Tull's first album, *This Was*, where Ian

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Anderson and cronies, all in their early twenties, donned old age makeup.

Only here it was like some George Romero flick.

Day of the Living Druids, perhaps?

That the effect was mostly brought on by makeup was encouraging. Nonetheless, the look somehow made Andrews more cognizant of his own encroaching middle-age. Still, the effect was mitigated immensely by the vitality, exuberance, mystery, reverence, and exhilaration of the music.

At this point, the band did a few numbers not on their seventies recordings, music with every bit of the melodic and inventive values, and yet a little more jagged with jazz, time changes, a little harder edge. Bitterness at popular rejection? A possibility, but for all the crunching and snarling of the guitar and the snap of the drums, there was still a magisterial sense of music as...as...

For these several numbers, Andrews groped for the right term, the proper concept.

With the tinkling of synthesizer chimes in a particularly poignant tune, and then the harmonic convergence of bass and lead guitar to lead to an almost celestial gasp of awe, he realized what it was:

Transcendence.

Woven from the mists of this strange island life, its history and mystery, its mingled peoples, somehow this music manufactured a kind of spell of explanation.

It said: There are more things in heaven and earth, Andrews, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

A rock critic friend of Andrews's had this theory:

The Brits, he said — The Brits love music. The Brits love all *kinds* of music, from around the world, from their own islands. And when they have the talent to play instruments and sing, all they want to do is to imitate that music. But they are so odd, so peculiar, that the music comes out twisted and warped and wonderfully and inimitably their own.

This was the case with The Wicker Men, certainly, and yet there were things in the music that touched chords of the bizarre beyond even this insight.

You could climb inside the music and stand on an ethereal plane of

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myth and imagination made real, with twinkles of wonder and hints of scuttling night creatures in the caverns of the majesty beyond.

For an hour and a half more the band wove a tapestry of sound and texture. By the ringing cymbals of the encore, Andrews was blissed out of his skull — and not just by the music. Somehow several more pints of bitter had found their way into his system.

A brief announcement that CDs were available at a table to one side was made, and then the band was gone, victims of the coming of that pumpkin-turning time in English pubs, eleven P.M. Andrews wished that they would play for hours more. Their music was so much more splendid and resonant live than recorded.

Nonetheless, the notion of CDs for sale — albums he did not have in his collection — was a satisfactory and thrilling one. Fortunately he'd just used his ATM card to get a healthy amount of money out of the bank. British CDs tended to be expensive and he braced himself for paying a lot of money as he took the last of his beer up to the table with the sale material. He'd already discovered an incredible amount of music simply unavailable in the States and could not help but buy it, even though it generally cost about fifteen pounds per CD — over twenty-two dollars apiece, in U.S. money.

There were four CDs available with which he was not familiar, and at only eight pounds apiece, a bargain.

He bought them all, along with a T-shirt, and put his name on a mailing list.

As he made a large buy, the fellow behind the table was very friendly to him.

"I don't suppose," said Andrews, "there's any more coming out."

"Hmm. You know, actually, the band themselves might have another CD in a case we didn't get up. Called *Equus Magister*, as a matter of fact. Said that if anyone was interested, they could come up for the first fifteen minutes after the show. While you're at it, they'll probably be quite happy to sign these for you as well."

Normally, Andrews was rather shy about this sort of thing. He had to force himself to go up to authors who were selling their books and have them sign, even though they were there for that express purpose.

However, now, emboldened by the large amount of beer swilling

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about in his abdomen and brain, he followed the pointing finger of the guy behind the table to a door just a few feet away.

This he opened and found a worn staircase leading up to the second floor. The only lighting was a dim low-wattage bulb hanging forlornly from the ceiling.

Andrews, gripping his recent acquisitions in one hand and his half-empty pint of bitter in the other, walked up the steps.

It was like entering C.S. Lewis's Wardrobe...only quite a bit more worn and tacky. Faded posters of past performances, mostly ripped and patchy, were tacked onto the walls. He reached the top of the stairs and he heard voices from an adjacent room.

He negotiated carefully past a table.

He took one more long gulp from his bitter and then set the glass down. He took a deep breath and headed toward the open door through which the voices filtered like whispers from an alternate dimension.

He leaned in slightly, and rapped the door politely.

Inside, the band members were sitting at a table in front of a collection of opened and unopened beer cans. They were laughing amongst themselves at some joke, and, for all their exertions upon the stage, seemed not a bit tired. Towels about their necks, but they had not yet taken off their makeup. Andrews felt as though he was intruding upon an after-concert meeting of Kiss and Alice Cooper at some golden anniversary concert. They still held their instruments in their hands. Even the drummer gripped his drumstick in one hand, a beer can in the other, as he swung around to greet the visitor.

"'Lo, mate," he said, showing a grim set of teeth. "Got some stuff for us to sign then?"

The keyboardist smiled as well, showing another set of bad teeth, many missing. Andrews had noticed this during the set, but he had thought that they'd been blacked out. The rotten teeth, closer up, were very real. "Come on in, then," the keyboardist said. His name was Gabriel Dickens, Andrews remembered. "Let's see what you've got here."

"Good Lord," said the bassist, Burt Larkin. "'E's got them bloody *all!*"

"Well, all that I don't have at home," said Andrews, emboldened by their friendliness. "I didn't even know these were available."

"Ah yes — compact disks," said the lead guitarist, Roger Banham,

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wiping beer foam from his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. "They brought us back from the grave, they did."

The others chuckled as though with some private joke.

"Actually, I understand that there's one that's not down there. I mean, they told me that I could buy it up here."

That caused a commotion and smiles all around.

"You mean *Equus*."

"*Equus Magister*, yes."

"You bought the other four...maybe we should just give it to 'im," said the bassist, the fretboard of his guitar wobbling excitedly.

"No, really, that won't be necessary," blurted Andrews. "I mean, eight more pounds won't make any difference...."

He caught himself. The English were funny about money. Money was something rather impolite.

Still, The Wicker Men seemed to not be too bothered by the notion of either giving away the CD — or taking the money. "Well, if you insist." The drummer got up and headed over to a cardboard box, still holding his drumsticks. He began to root through the box.

"Buy another in advance and we'll tell you the story of 'The Bloody Troll and the Frenchmen,'" laughed Gabriel Dickens. "You're American, then?"

"Yes, that's right...uhm...a professor from the Midwest. Here at Cambridge to research." He took a breath. "You know, it's such a treat for me to hear you. I know you Brits get embarrassed easily, but I have to say, I've been a fan of yours since the seventies."

"*You're* the guy, then!" said Larkin, and the others started laughing so hard Andrews thought they might fall apart. For all they were animated enough, up close they looked much more frail than they had on the stage.

"Actually, one of many — maybe you should tour the States."

The others looked at each other, and the smiles momentarily faded.

"Here you go," said the drummer, coming back and holding a CD in his hand. Inside the plastic cover was the pictograph of a horse with a rider holding a spear and a drum, with the title and "The Wicker Men" spelled out in runish letters.

Andrews fished out his eight pounds and then took the CD.

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"Have a seat!" said Dickens.

Andrews sat in the ratty chair that the man pointed at. It was covered with strips of masking tape and it wobbled, but Andrews was happy to have a place to perch. He felt a bit dizzy what with all the alcohol he'd consumed. There was a sour smell to the room, which didn't help, but his enthusiasm drowned all that quite well enough. Nonetheless, he couldn't help but feel as though he'd just dropped down a hobbit hole, and its odd occupants with their lilting West Country accents were welcoming him with decidedly peculiar tea and crumpets.

"'Ere you go. P'raps you'd like a beer."

A large can of Ruddles County Ale was clopped down in front of him. He really had had enough, but figured it would be impolitic and impolite to refuse.

"Yes, and if you'll just sign these, I'd really, really appreciate it." He tendered the CDs, and accompanied them with his Bic ballpoint. "The one I just bought too, please."

"Right. Seeing as you're the only one that's accepted our invitation, I suppose we can take some pains 'ere," said Dickens, starting the process.

An uneasy silence fell on the assemblage.

Andrews popped the top of his Ruddles, lifted the heavy can and drank, and two of the band members grinned at him approvingly, lifting their own drinks.

When he could drink no more, he put the can down. What to talk to them about? Who *were* they? He was terrible at making small talk, awful at cracking jokes. He'd already burst out with what a fan he was...what could he add to that?

Ah...the old failsafe...a question.

"Erm.... Do you tour much?"

It seemed extremely rude to ask if they had day jobs. Surely they didn't make enough from touring small clubs like this one and releasing self-issued CDs. Studio time, instruments, travel expenses: all that must eat money up. It seemed that it all must be a labor of love...and it must hurt terribly that they didn't receive proper compensation for their remarkable mystic accomplishments.

"Ah..." said the drummer, accepting the first CD and signing it with a pen from his pocket with his right hand. Still he clung to his drumsticks

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with the other. "Well, I suppose you could say we tour when the spirit moves us...and that would be about this time every year."

"Aye, the two weeks before the winter solstice," said the lead guitarist, "With the ghosts of Christmas in the air!"

"Aye. That seems about the right time for us," said the bassist, taking out the sleeve from one of the CDs and affixing his signature to it. "The moonlight wears well."

"And the drink tastes right."

"It's really lovely, incredible music that you make, I must say. What would you say is your greatest inspiration?" asked Andrews.

"Well, it certainly isn't pound notes!" said the bassist.

That brought about laughter all around.

The keyboardist turned. His seemingly half-ruined face took on a thoughtful cast. He took a sip from his can of Ruddles and he held the small keyboard case close to him, like some sort of talisman.

"Aye. The moon and the stars, the sand and the sea. The roots and the hops, the sun and the freeze of ice rind on the leaves at the edge of the forest, and the shivering hare there. These islands have known wave after wave of peoples and souls and languages, and all of them had their musics and their magics. And then technology invaded.... And the musics and magics made that its own. But you know, Master Andrews, it is said that there were beings here before the first humans, beings of moondust and starlight. And like the Celts, the Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes, the Vikings, the Romans, and the Normans, they mixed their blood and dreams and power with each succeeding wave — and yet remained very much their own selves. Perhaps that is who we hear then, whispering in the brooks and pubs of our homes...singing in the telephone wires the old songs to the beat of electricity and internal combustion machines...perhaps we only play the music that these creatures of Britannica whisper in our ears."

There was total silence for a moment, except for the scratching of pens as the others signed the progression of CD sleeves.

Andrews felt again that he was in the presence of strangeness beyond telling.

"And then again," said the bassist. "We're just the progressive Spinal Tap and don't know when to throw in the fuckin' towel!"

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Again laughter, and Andrews felt relief.

"Rock and roll imbeciles, heh?" said Gabriel. "Well, at least we make a joyful noise going out."

He held up his can of beer and saluted the assembly. They all dropped their signing pens and saluted as well.

Andrews picked up his own beer. He was so shaken, he found himself finishing it.

He waited patiently as the others scratched out their names upon the CD sleeves. Finally, when they were finished, he put them all in a stack.

"And if you'd care to stay in touch," said Dickens. "There's an address."

"You'll let me know if a new CD's coming out?"

"We'll let you know *when* the new CD's coming!" barked the bassist, still gay.

Andrews blushed with embarrassment. "Yes, of course there's going to be one..." He tucked the CDs under his arm and stood. "Thanks very much and it's really been great to meet you."

Farewells were made as the others returned to their beers and discussion. Andrews exited as Dickens lifted a wrinkled hand and gave him a nice toodle-loo.

"And could you just close the door behind you as you depart?" said Dickens. "There's a good fellow."

Andrews did so. Afterward, he had to stand for a moment in the hallway to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

In the room behind him, one of the men started singing. Andrews recognized the words. "Where the bee sucks, there suck I." Shakespeare. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Puck's speech.

Andrews shook his head.

When he got back to the Midwest, the first thing he was going to do was go to Harry's Diner, get an American hamburger (he was avoiding the burgers here not just because they were bad — but because of something called "mad cow disease" that was affecting British cattle), real American fries, a vanilla milkshake. He was going to look out to the vast panorama of prairies and wallow in the normality like a sweet lukewarm bubble bath.

There were a few stragglers left in the pub, and a guy was going around

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picking up empty glasses, stacking them one upon another and then carrying them behind the bar.

Just at the exit, Andrews thought to stop for a moment to examine his prizes before he took his bike ride back home.

The CDs looked wonderful, with vibrant, colorful artwork. No Roger Deans, of course, but it was the thought that counted. Across these were scratched signatures. At this point, he really couldn't tell which was which...but it really didn't make any difference. He'd gotten that other CD...

Or had he?

He didn't see *Equus Magister* right offhand.

Hastily, he shuffled through the lot.

No, not here.

Damn. He must have left it back upstairs!

He looked back toward the dark stairway that he'd just come down. How embarrassing!

However, he couldn't just leave it there. He wanted the CD desperately. Perhaps, in a more sober state, he would not have had the nerve to go back up and intrude upon the group. However, emboldened by drink, and desperate for the album (unique now, after all, because of the signature and the memory) he tilted toward the stairs once more.

After all, they *had* been friendly enough, he thought as he started padding up the dark and dreary stairs. They'd understand, and in fact be alarmed themselves that he'd left it behind.

"Look 'ere!" he could see them saying as they popped another bitter can top. "The American's left behind his CD."

"Oh dearie me! Absent-minded lot, aren't they?"

"Perhaps we should bring it down to him."

Yes, that was what they'd say, he thought as he reached the landing. Only he'd save the time for them.

Even though he thought he'd closed it, he saw that the door was open. Soft light seeped out, and there was that sour smell again, accompanied by strands of tobacco smoke drifting out.

Soft voices whispered and cans clinked.

Relieved that the door was open (a sign of welcome, surely) he stepped forward and entered the room.

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"Pardon me," he said. "But I left — "

He stopped, stunned by the sight before him.

Three of the members of the band were sprawled upon the couch, like abandoned mannequins. No, they looked like corpses, mummified, dried with strips of skin sticking out willy-nilly.

The fourth was slowly sinking to the floor, slipping down from a bass guitar suspended in the air, gleaming as though in starlight. From the base of the guitar, legs like those of a hairy frog had grown, with webbed feet. From the frets now extended wings of fairy gauze. Mothlike antennae rose up from the tip, with big, shining, alien eyes, glowing with phosphorescent intelligent light.

Behind this creature of pixie technology stood the other instruments: the drumsticks, having grown butterfly wings and lemur eyes, fluttered above like a moth about a candle; long spider-legs had grown from the keyboard, and spangled eyestalks wobbled as they turned to look at Andrews, eyelids heavy with a diamond dew; and finally, the lead guitar, batwings aflap, a stern but not unkind elfish face turning around, eyes twinkling as though peering in from a different dimension.

For a moment a twitch of consternation trembled through this arbor of alien, fairy vines. Tinkling communications were made and for a moment Andrews felt a terrible sense of danger.

But then green leaves seemed to sprout from the lead guitar, studded with flowers.

They said something, and it sounded like a waterfall of cascading musics, dancing in a rainbowed glade: not words at all.

A tendril wrapped around a CD, lifted it. It seemed to float in the air, borne by moonbeams and mist, then hung suspended in the air before the astonished professor.

The voice sounded like a Mellotron attempting to speak.

"Please do keep your gob shut, eh?" it seemed to say.

"Yes," said Andrews. "Yes, of course."

He grabbed the CD, turned and hastened back down the stairs.

Fairy music twinkled and glittered and laughed behind him like the voices of the spheres, divesting themselves of the garments of the moldy and rich earth.

— *For 128 Harvey Road.*

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So far as we know, Paul Park is the author of delightfully baroque and rich novels such as Celestis, The Gospel of Corax, *and the Starbridge chronicles. An e-mail we received from him notes that this story appeared first electronically in February in* Omni Online, *but you'll forgive us if we wonder about the veracity of all these facts once you read this brief report.*

Get a Grip

By Paul Park

HERE'S HOW I FOUND OUT: I was in a bar called Dave's on East 14th Street. It wasn't my usual place. I had been dating a woman in Stuyvesant Town. One night after I left her place, I still wasn't eager to go home. So on my way I stopped into Dave's.

I used to spend a lot of time in bars, though I don't smoke or drink. But I like the secondhand stuff. And the conversations you could have with strangers — you could tell them anything. "Ottawa is a fine city," you could say. "My brother lives in Ottawa," I could say, though in fact I'm an only child. But people would nod their heads.

This kind of storytelling used to drive my ex-wife crazy. "It's so pointless. It's not like you're pretending you're an astronaut or a circus clown. That I could see. But a Canadian?"

"It's a subtle thrill," I conceded.

"Why not tell the truth?" Barbara would say. "That you're a successful lawyer with a beautiful wife you don't deserve. Is that so terrible?"

Not terrible so much as difficult to believe. It sounded pretty thin,

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even before I found out. And of course none of it turned out to be true at all.

Anyway, that night I was listening to someone else. Someone was claiming he had seen Reggie Jackson's last game on TV. I nodded, but all the time I was looking past him toward a corner of the bar, where a man was sitting at a table by himself. He was smoking cigarettes and drinking, and I recognized him.

But I didn't know from where. I stared at him for a few minutes. What was different — had he shaved his beard? Then suddenly I realized he was in the wrong country. It was Boris Bezugly. It truly was.

I took my club soda over to join him. We had parted on such good terms. "Friends, friends!" he had shouted drunkenly on the platform of Petersburg Station, saliva dripping from his lips. Now he was drunk again. He sat picking at the wax of the red candle. When he looked up at me, I saw nothing in his face, just bleared eyes and a provisionary smile.

We had met two years before, when a partner in the firm was scouting the possibility of a branch office in Moscow. Even in Russia he was the drunkest man I ever met. When we were introduced, he had passed out and fallen on his back as we were still shaking hands. Maybe it was his drunkenness that kept him from recognizing me now, I thought. After all, it had taken me a moment.

But we were in New York. Surely running into me was not as strange as me running into him. And why hadn't he told me he was coming? "Sdravsvuytse," I said, grinning. "Can I buy you a drink?"

What passed over his face was an expression of such horror and rage, it made me put up my hand. But then his face went blank and he turned away from me, huddling around his candle and his drink.

He had lost weight, and his black beard was gone. In Russia he had worn a hilarious mismatch of plaid clothes, surmounted by an old fur cap. Now he wore a tweed suit, a denim shirt open at the neck. The cap was gone.

"Boris," I said.

In Russia his English had been absurd. I used to tell him he sounded like a hit man in a cold war novel, and he had laughed aloud. Now he spoke quickly and softly in a mid-Atlantic accent: "I think you're making a mistake."

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And I would have thought so, too, except for the strange expression I had seen. So I persevered. I pulled out one of the chairs and sat down. "What are you doing?" he cried. "My God, if they find us. If they see us here."

These words gave me what I thought was a glimmer of understanding. In Moscow, in the kitchen of his tiny apartment, Boris once had put away enough vodka to let him pass through drunkenness into another stage, a kind of clarity and grim sobriety. Then he had told me what his life was like under the Communists — the lies that no one had believed. The interrogations. When he was a student in the sixties after Brezhnev first came in, he had spent two years in protective custody.

Now maybe he was remembering those times. "My friend," I said, "it's all right. You're in America."

These words seemed to fill him with another gust of fury. He tried to get up, and I could see he was very drunk. "I don't know you, I've never met you," he muttered, grinding out his cigarette butt. But then the cocktail waitress was there.

"I'll take a club soda," I said. "And my friend will have a Smirnoff's."

"No," he snarled, "that was the problem with that job. Get me a bourbon," he told the waitress. Then to me: "I hate vodka."

Which surprised me more than anything he'd said so far. In Moscow he had recited poetry about vodka. "Yeah," he told me now, smiling in spite of himself. "Tastes change."

Apparently he had reassured himself that no one was watching us. But he waited until the waitress had come and gone before he spoke again. "Boris," I said, and he interrupted me.

"Don't call me that. It was just a job, a two-week job. I barely remember it."

"What are you talking about?"

He smiled. "You don't know, do you? You really don't know. Get a grip," he said. "It's like candy from a baby."

I saw such a mix of passions in his face. Envy, frustration, anger, fear. And then a kind of malignant grin that was so far from my perception of his character that I stared at him, fascinated.

"You never went to Russia," he said. "You've never met a single Russian. You were in a theme park they built outside Helsinki, surrounded

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by people like me. They were paying us to guzzle vodka and wear false beards and act like clowns. 'Sdravsvuytse,' my ass!"

He was crazy. "My poor friend," I said. "Who was paying you? The KGB?"

He knocked his heavy-bottomed glass against the table, spilling bourbon on the polyurethaned wood. "Not the KGB," he hissed. "The KGB never existed. None of it existed. None of this." He waved his hand around the room. He was in the middle of a paranoid breakdown of some sort. I could see that. And yet the moment I heard him, I felt instinctively that what he said was true.

"They never would have taken you to Russia," he went on. "Not to the real Russia." As he spoke I brought back my own memories — the grime, the cold, the sullen old babushkas with rags around their heads. The concrete apartment blocks. The horrible food.

He put down his empty glass. "Thanks for the drink. And now I'm definitely getting out of here before somebody sees us. Because this is definitely against the rules."

Then he was gone, and I walked home. And maybe I wouldn't have thought much about it, only the next day I was walking up Fifth Avenue on my lunch hour, and I passed the offices for Aeroflot. I went in and sat down with the people who were waiting to be helped. We were in a row of armchairs next to the window.

This is ridiculous, I thought. And I was about to get up and go, when I found myself staring at a travel poster. One of the agents was talking on the phone, and there was a framed poster of Red Square above her desk. And was that Boris Bezugly in the middle of a group of smiling Russians in front of St. Basil's? The beard, the hat, the absurd plaid?

The Aeroflot agent was a dark-haired, heavy-chested woman, dressed in black pumps, beige tights, and a black mini-skirt. A parody of a Russian vamp. And what was that language she was speaking on the phone? The more I listened, the more improbable it sounded.

I asked the woman sitting next to me. She frowned. "Russian, of course," she said. How could she be so sure? Made-up gobbledygook, but of course once you let yourself start thinking like that, the whole world starts to fall apart. Not immediately, but gradually. I took the woman from Stuyvesant Town to a musical on Broadway. Critics had pretended to like

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it, though it was obviously bad. Audience members had applauded, laughed — who were they trying to fool?

At work sometimes I found it hard to concentrate. I was representing the plaintiff in a civil suit. Yet no actual client could have been so petty, so vindictive. In my office I sat staring at the man, watching his lips move, waiting for him to give himself away.

And of course I spent more of my time at Dave's. I would go there every evening after work, and in time I was drinking more than just club sodas. But it was weeks before I saw Boris again. He came in out of a freezing rain and made his way directly toward me, where I was sitting at a table by myself.

He sat down without asking and leaned forward, rubbing his hands over the tiny candle flame. "Listen," he said, "I'm in trouble," and he looked it. He needed a shave. His eyes were bloodshot. He wasn't wearing a coat.

"Listen, I can't do it anymore. All that lying and pretending. I've screwed up two more jobs and now they're on to me. I can't go home. Please, can you give me some money? I've got to get away."

"I'll pay you fifty dollars for some information," I said. I took the bills from my pocket, but he interrupted me.

"No, I mean your watch or something. I can't use that bogus currency." He pulled some coins out of the pocket of his pants, big, shiny, aluminum coins like Mardi Gras doubloons. In fact as I looked closely, I saw that's what they were. The purple one in his palm was stamped with the head of Pete Fountain playing the clarinet.

"I don't even have enough here for a drink," he said.

"I'll get you one." I raised my hand for the waitress. But then I saw her at the corner of the bar, talking with the bartender. As I watched, she pointed over at us.

"Oh my God," said my Russian friend. His voice was grim and strange. "Give me the watch."

I stripped it off, though it was an expensive Seiko. "Thanks," he said, looking at the face, the sweep of the second hand. "And in return I'll answer one minute's worth of questions. Go."

"Who are you?" I asked.

But he shrugged irritably. "No, it's not important. My name is Nathan — so what? What about you?"

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"I know about myself," I said uncertainly.

"Do you? Paul Park, Esq. Yale, 1981. But what makes you think you were smart enough to go to the real Yale? Do you think they let just anybody in?"

Actually, I had always kind of wondered about that. So his words gave me a painful kind of pleasure. Then he went on: "Twenty seconds. What about your marriage? What was that all about?"

"I'm divorced."

"Of course you are. The woman who was playing your wife landed another job. It was never supposed to be more than a two-year contract with an option, which she chose not to renew. Last I heard, she was doing Medea, Blanche Dubois, and Lady Macbeth for some repertory company up in Canada."

Again, this sounded so hideously plausible that I said nothing.

"Forty seconds."

"Fifty seconds."

"Wait," I said, but he was gone out the door. He left only his Pete Fountain doubloon, which I slid into my pocket.

Then in a little while the police were there. A man in a white raincoat sat opposite me, asking me questions. "Did he say where he was going? Did he give you anything?"

"No," I said. "No. Nothing."

But then when I was watching TV later that night, I saw that Nathan Rose, a performance artist wanted in connection with several outstanding warrants, had been arrested. There was a photograph, and a brief description of his accomplishments. Nathan Rose had been a promising young man, recipient of several grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. The newscaster's voice was sad and apologetic, and she seemed to look out of the television directly at me. She made no mention of the crime he'd been accused of. What was it — impersonating a Russian?

That night was the beginning of a quick decline for me, because success in life depends on not asking too many questions. The patterns of illusion that made up the modern world require a kind of faith, a suspension of disbelief. The revenge on skeptics is quick and sure, and I soon found myself hustled out of what I'd thought was my real world as rudely as I might have been thrown out of a magic show, if I had stood up

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in the audience and explained the tricks while the performance was in progress.

But of course at that time I could only guess at the real truth. I conceived the idea that the government had hired an enormous troupe of actors, administered and paid for by the NEA, to create and sustain an illusion of reality for certain people. At first I played with the idea that I might be the only one, but no. That was too grandiose, too desperate a fantasy. So much money, so much effort, just to make a fool out of a single citizen. The Republicans never would have stood for it. Providing jobs for actors just wasn't that important, even in New York.

I lost my job, my friends, and my apartment. I refused to work long hours for play money. And no one could tolerate me. People I knew, I kept trying to catch them in small lies and inconsistencies. I would ask them questions. "If this is just a job for you, why aren't you nicer to me? Surely we'd enjoy it more. How can we turn this into a comedy? A farce? A musical?"

By the middle of December I was living by the train tracks, inside the tunnel under Riverside Park. Maybe it wasn't necessary for me to have gone that far. But at a certain point, I thought I'd try to penetrate down below the level of deception. Because I imagined that the illusions were falser and more elaborate the higher up you went, which is why so many rich people are crazy. Wherever they go, part of their brain is mumbling to the other part, "Surely the actual Plaza Hotel isn't such a dump. Surely an authentic Mercedes corners better than this. Surely a genuine production of Hamlet isn't quite so dull. Surely the real Alps are higher and more picturesque."

But that night in my tarpaulin tent next to the train tracks, wrapped in my blankets, it was hard for me to think that the real Riverside Park was even darker, even colder, even more miserable. I was dressed in a dinner jacket I had kept from my apartment. I was glutted with hors d'oeuvres, drunk on chablis, because New York provides many opportunities to a man in black tie, especially around Christmas time. I had attended office parties and openings all the way from midtown, pretending all the way. I had been an architect, an actor, a designer, a literary agent. In each place as I grew drunker, the lies I told grew more outrageous, yet people still smiled and nodded. Why not? They were being paid good Mardi Gras doubloons to pretend to believe me.

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In my tent, I slid my hand down into my pocket and clasped my hand around my own Pete Fountain coin, perhaps, I thought, the only genuine thing I'd ever owned. Drunk and despairing, I let the cold come into me, let it calm me until I wasn't sure if I could move even if I'd wanted to. My hands and legs were stiff and strange. I looked up the tunnel into the dark and imagined how the world was changing outside, how in the morning I would climb out through the grate into a new world of heat and light and honesty.

As the hours passed, the walls of the tunnel seemed to close around me. But yes, there was some light down toward the tunnel's mouth, too bright, too soft for dawn. Yes, it seemed to fill the hole, to chase away the darkness, and it was as if I had left my body and was drifting toward it, suspended over the tracks. There was heat, too, beyond my fingertips, and as I drifted down the tunnel I felt it penetrate my body and my soul. I imagined faces in the tunnel with me, people standing along the rails, smiling and murmuring. As I passed them I reached out, especially to the ones I recognized: my mother, my grandparents, my childhood friends, and even Barbara, my ex-wife. Yes, I thought, this is the truth.

It couldn't last forever. I was sprawled over the tracks, and the light was coming toward me. I listened to the muffled voices and the creak of the wheels, and the light was all around me. It was so bright, I had to close my eyes. As I did so, I heard somebody say, "That's it. That's a wrap."

When I sat up, I was in a crowd of people and machines. The big lamp had gone out, replaced by a yellow fluorescent line along the middle of the vault.

By its light I could see much that had been hidden from me. For one thing, the entire tunnel was only about twenty-five yards long. I could see the brick ends of it now, cunningly painted to look like train tracks disappearing in both directions.

In front of me there was a lamp rigged to a platform, which ran on wheels along the rails. Now that the lamp was out, I could see the movie camera beneath it, the camera man stripping off his gloves and his coat; they had turned off the refrigeration machines. There was a whole line of them along the wall, and I guess they had been making quite a racket, because now I could hear all kinds of talking from the crew as they finished up.

I threw aside my blanket and sat rubbing my hands. Nobody was

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paying any attention to me. But then I saw my mother coming toward me through a crowd of technicians, and she squatted down. "Congratulations," she said. "That was great."

"Mother," I stammered, "is it really you?" I admit I was surprised to see her, because she had passed away in the spring of 1978.

She was wearing a silk shirt, blue jeans, and cowboy boots. She was smiling. "Yeah, that's great. I tell you, these last few weeks you've made me proud I ever got to work with you. Proud you're my son, so to speak. The paranoia, the anger, the disgust. It was all so real."

"Mother," I said, "I can't believe it. You look so young."

She winked. "Yeah, sure. You've probably never seen me without makeup. But let's not get carried away. Somewhere along the line you must have guessed. That was the whole point of this game."

She stood up. And now others were helping me to my feet. I recognized a few old faces, and then Barbara was there. "Your suit's a mess," she said.

I was stunned, overwhelmed to see her. Her freckled nose. Her crooked smile. She reached up to touch my damp bow-tie. When I'd known her, her breath had always been a little sour, a symptom of chronic gastric distress. Now she was standing close to me, and I caught a whiff of the mints she used — the same old brand. At least that was for real, I thought.

Her little head was close to my lapel. Packed with brains. I'd always said that was the reason she so easily outwitted me. The space inside her skull was so small that her thoughts never had more than an inch or so to travel, to make connections. Her ideas moved faster, like molecules in a gas when it's condensed.

And at the moment when I smelled her breath, I felt a little surge of hope. Even if there was no place for me in her old life, maybe now there might be some new way for us to be together in this new world. Cleverer than me, maybe she had already had the same idea, because I felt her arms around me, her head against my cheek as I bent down. "I'm sorry I was so mean," she whispered. "But I had to. It was the script. Sometimes it broke my heart, the things I had to do to you. I'm not normally so promiscuous."

Mother and the rest had disappeared, and we were surrounded by technicians packing up equipment. "I just wanted to tell you right away," she said. "Before anybody else talks to you. Sex and betrayal are the only

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things that keep the yuppie games alive. The only reason anybody wants to play. So I had to. That thing where you caught me with your boss's wife — I actually protested to the writers. I cried for days when we were finished."

Then she took my hand and led me outside. It was early morning. We walked through a park that seemed all of a sudden only twenty-five yards wide, and it was rapidly disappearing as people rolled up the astroturf and wheeled away the papier-mâché balustrades.

The night before, I had come down to the park the way I always did, along West 98th Street. Now as we approached Riverside Drive, I could see as if from a slightly different angle the painted plywood facades of the buildings, all just a few inches thick. On 98th Street itself there was a huge crew striking the set, so instead of going back that way, Barbara led me north, uptown, and soon we were lost among streets I didn't recognize, although I'd lived on the Upper West Side my whole life.

"Where are we?" I asked faintly.

"Toronto. They always use it for the New York shoots. The real New York is so expensive. It's like American actors — no one can afford them anymore. We use Canadians for everything."

"So what was this?" I asked. "A movie or a game?"

"Both. It's interactive TV. A few hired professionals like me and your mom, and then tons of paying customers. They do most of the minor characters, the extras and what-not. Then the whole thing is broadcast live, with your thoughts picked up on an internal mike as a kind of voice-over. That's what made the show — you were so innocent, so clueless. The show started when you were fifteen, which meant it took you twenty-two years to figure out what was going on. It's a new record. And in the end we had to give you massive hints."

"When I was fifteen?"

"Sure. All the rest was just recovered-memory syndrome. Who wants to make a show about a kid? I mean except for all the shows within the show. Beaver Cleaver and so forth."

"Beaver Cleaver?"

"No expense was spared," said Barbara. "It's the information superhighway. But you have to understand — this was a huge deal."

She was right. By the time we hit Yonge Street a crowd had gathered.

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Old ladies, teenagers, men, women, all wanting to shake my hand and get my autograph. I was a celebrity, like O.J. Simpson or Woody Allen, except of course I really existed. I was a real person, and not just a collection of computer-generated film clips.

"Mr. Park," somebody shouted. "When did you know for sure?"

"Show us the doubloon!" demanded another, and when I took it from my pocket, everyone laughed and clapped.

An old man grasped my hand. I recognized him as the super of the building next to mine. "I just wanted to say you've given my wife and me such pleasure over the years. Most of the shows should be banned from the airwaves, if it was up to me. But you never even raised your voice. No violence at all. Not that you weren't tempted," he said, giving Barbara a severe look.

Then the limo arrived, small and sleek. Inside I could hear a small hum, as if from a computer. No one was driving. We pulled out slowly into the wide street, and then we were heading downtown. "So what was the show's name?" I asked.

"It was called *Get a Grip*," said Barbara. And when she saw my face, she grinned. "Oh come on, don't take it like that. Sure, you were kind of a wimp, but the guy is right. It was a wholesome show. Every day we found new ways to humiliate you, but you just soldiered on. Most of the time you didn't even notice. I mean sure, you were a total moron, but that was all right. It was your dignity that people loved."

We drove on through the unfamiliar streets. "I guess it didn't keep me from being canceled," I said.

"Well, to tell the truth it was all a little dated. And you needed a good female lead. That fat tart in Stuyvesant Town just wasn't doing it. People seemed to find your life less interesting as soon as I bailed out."

"I guess I felt the same way."

Barbara patted my hand. "But you were still popular among retirees. You have no idea how bad most of the competition is. Like the guy said, they gave over most of the twentieth century to war games. Vietnam, KKK, Holocaust, Cold War, Hiroshima. Those are all the American shows. Kids love them, even the minorities. But I can't stand them."

"Hiroshima?" I asked.

She smiled. "Meanwhile, we thought it was a stroke of genius to work

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all that into the background of *Get a Grip*. To show what life in America might have been like if it had all really happened. Of course we had to change the footage and the point of view — reshoot a lot of it. Most of those shows are ridiculously patriotic."

"Ingenious," I murmured.

"But that's how we got into trouble. ABC claimed it was copyright infringement, and the American ambassador protested. But *Get a Grip* was a satire, for God's sake. Even the U.S. courts ruled in our favor."

After a little while I said, "So what did really happen?"

"Well, that's what I'm telling you. The Americans were furious for years. So ABC finally made a hostile bid for Ottawa Communication, which produced your show. The deal went through last week, and *Get a Grip* was canceled. But there had been rumors for months, which was why the writers brought back all that Russian stuff last fall. They wanted to take the show to its own end."

"No. I mean, what really happened? In the world."

She squeezed my arm. "Don't worry. You'll soon catch up. Besides, we're here."

We pulled up in front of a hotel. "You'll love it," she said. "Czar Nicholas III stayed here last time he was in town."

So I got out and followed her up the steps. In through the revolving doors. The lobby was all ormolu and velvet and gilt mantelpieces. The elevator ran in a cage up through the middle of the spiral staircase. "What am I doing now?" I asked as we got in.

"Goddamn it, Pogo, don't be such a dope." I hated when she called me "Pogo." It was a nickname left over from my earliest childhood, and she only used it to annoy me. But as I rode up in the elevator, it occurred to me that maybe no one had ever really called me that. Maybe all those painful memories had been induced when I was fifteen. Maybe they had all been covered in a flashback, when *Get a Grip* first went on the air.

My eyes filled with tears. "What's the matter now?" said Barbara. "Honest to God, you'd think you were being boiled over a slow fire. It's the best hotel in town. I thought you might want to rest for a few hours, take a shower, change your clothes before the reception at the president's house tonight. The Russian ambassador will be there — I tell you you're a star. A symbol of Canadian pride. Come on, is that so terrible?"

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Then when we were alone together in the jewel-box room, she said, "Besides, I've missed you."

But I wasn't listening. I was looking at my face in the mirror above the dresser. The same curly hair and gullible eyes, as if nothing had happened. "My whole life has been a parody," I said, watching my lips move. But then I had to smile, because it was exactly what I might have said back in America, back during the salad days of *Get a Grip*.

Barbara was behind me. In the mirror I saw her undo the first few buttons of her blouse, and then slip it off her shoulders. "Let me make it okay for you," she said. Then it was like a dream come true, because she was leading me to the bed and pulling off my clothes. I had thought about this moment so many times since we split up, directing us as if we were the actors in a scene. In my mind, sometimes she was harsh and fast, sometimes passive and accommodating. Sometimes it took hours, and sometimes it was over right away. But none of my fantasizing prepared me for this moment, which was not sublime so much as strange. During two years of marriage, I thought I had got to know her well. But I had never done any of the things she required of me in that hotel room; I had never heard of anybody doing them. But, "Things are different here," she whispered. "Let me teach you how to make it in the real world," she said, before I lost consciousness.

Then I came to, and I was lying on the bed. Barbara was in the shower. I could hear the water running. I sat naked on the side of the bed, staring at the television. It was in a lacquer cabinet on top of a marble table, and the remote was on the floor near my foot. There were hundreds of buttons on it.

Then suddenly I was seized with a new suspicion, and I flicked it on. I flicked through several channels, seeing nothing but football games. But there I was on channel 599xtc, buck naked, staring at myself. Behind me the hotel room, the ripped sheets and soggy pillows. And on the bottom corner of the screen, a blinking panel that said:

PRESS ANY KEY TO CONTINUE.

Then Barbara was there, toweling her neck, looking over my shoulder. "Okay, so it's not quite over yet," she said. "There are still some things you ought to know." ☙

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Carrie Richerson's last appearance in these pages was with "The Harrowing" last December. Here she offers a tale not for the faint of heart, but then how often does the truth honor faint hearts? And how often do the dead honor the wishes of faint-hearted people—or anyone's?

The Quick and the Dead

By Carrie Richerson

MY BROTHER FRANK CAME home tonight. Mother and I were just sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner, my first at home in years, when the doorbell rang. I flipped on the porch light, threw open the door and saw him standing there.

Seven years in the grave had not been kind. A whiff of rot crept in under the formaldehyde; the skin that had looked like shiny plastic under the tasteful lighting of the funeral home now showed small cracks and flakes like badly glazed pottery. His wild red hair had become stringy and colorless, and the blue suit we'd buried him in, the one that he had so outgrown that his wrists stuck way out the cuffs and the undertaker had had to slit the back to get it to fit over his wide-receiver shoulders, hung loosely on his shrunken frame.

"Hello, Jenny," he said.

"You sorry son-of-a-bitch," I said, and slammed the door in his face. As an afterthought, I turned off the porch light.

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Mother was lighting the candles when I returned to the dining room. Losing first her husband, then her son, had spurred her to cling to the comforts of tradition. I understood her little rituals, but had no desire to share them. College had allowed me to escape, but this year, my first in med school, some charitable impulse had moved me to give in to the hopeful, lonely note in her voice when she called and asked if I were planning to come home to Gulfport for the holiday. Now the trappings of a traditional turkey dinner, bowls and platters of too much food, littered the table; absurd for just the two of us. At least she had cooked a small bird instead of an eighteen-pound behemoth.

"Wrong address," I announced, breezing past her into the kitchen. I found the bourbon right where I expected, and returned to the dining table with the bottle and two glasses. Mother declined; I ignored her frown of disapproval and buried my nose in my tumbler. The bouquet was almost sweet enough to take the smell of Frank out of my nostrils.

I drank and watched Mother carve the turkey. It shocked me to see how old she looked. I remembered a younger woman, laugh wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, playing ball in the backyard with Dad, Frank, and me. Before Dad died when I was six, Frank nine. Before Frank died at eighteen, seven years ago. Now the candlelight highlighted those wrinkles, spreading their seams over her whole face, and picked out more gray than red in her curls. She was one of those women who had grown thinner, more intense, more *brittle* with age. I was probably looking at my own face, a quarter-century down the line. I shivered. Maybe Frank was walking on my grave.

At the thought, as if on cue, the doorbell went off again. "I'll get it," I said, popping up. Damn that brother of mine.

He stood on the step with a patience he'd never displayed in life. Frank had hurtled through the world, and into death, lingering just long enough after the accident for Mother to make the agonizing decision to donate his perfect blue eyes (her own blue eyes) to the Lions Club Eye Bank. Morbidly curious, I had asked the funeral director at the viewing why the closed eyes didn't look sunken; he had explained gently about glass eyeballs used to provide a natural contour to the face. What he hadn't explained was that, since there was no need, the glass hadn't been painted to resemble a real eye. Blank white balls stared back at me from Frank's sockets. How did he see? I wondered.

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"What do you *want*, Frank? Can't you just leave us alone? You're going to upset Mother."

"Let me in, Jenny. I have to come in."

Not "I want" but "I have to." No one knows what cosmic injunction the dead are following by getting up out of their graves and returning to their families, but everyone knows by now that it's not a matter subject to negotiation. I raised my hand to an uncaring Heaven. "C'mon, God. How about a lightning bolt — just a little one — to incinerate this maggoty lump that used to be my brother?" But God is asleep at the switch, or maybe dead Himself. No help there.

The dead have no sense of humor. Frank waited just long enough to see if my prayer would be answered, then stepped forward over the threshold. I put out a hand to block him. His broken chest felt spongy under the suit. "I don't want you here, Frank. Stay away from me. If you come near me, I'll...."

"You'll what, Jenny? What can you do to me?" He wasn't defiant, or angry, or contemptuous. The dead don't need to be any of those things. They are just indestructibly persistent, and they always get their way, whatever it is, sooner or later.

Mother looked up, a slice of breast meat pinned unmercifully between knifeblade and fork, and froze, the color draining from her face to leave her as ashen as Frank. I took the serving utensils out of her hands before she could drop them, and pressed her into the chair. I grabbed the liquor bottle and poured, then put her trembling hands around the glass. She drank. She never took her eyes off Frank's face.

"Hello, Mother," he said from the doorway.

She stopped shaking, as though a switch had been flipped somewhere. She pushed the whiskey away, walked to Frank and embraced him. "My darling baby boy. I'm so glad you're home. Come sit down," she said, leading him to the chair on her right and pulling it out for him. "You, too, Jenny," she ordered, indicating the chair across from Frank's.

She began briskly serving up dressing, gravy, vegetables. Frank and I stared at each other over the mounting piles on our plates. The smell of hot roast meat clashed with the odor of preservatives and decay. Bile rushed into my mouth.

"I'm afraid I'm not very hungry, Mom," I said brightly, folding my

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napkin beside my plate. "I'm sure you two have lots to talk about. See you in the morning." I scooped up the bourbon and my glass and fled upstairs. Mother sent a vague "Good night, dear" after me; she was already digging into her dinner with gusto and briefing Frank on seven years' worth of neighborhood gossip.

MOTHER HAD changed nothing about my old room except to keep it cleaner than I ever had. I settled onto the bed with a full tumbler at my elbow and my beloved copy of *Little Women*, but this night the cheery optimism of the March girls couldn't captivate me. After a while I gave up the pretense and set the book aside. Then I got up and did something I hadn't done in years: I locked the door.

The level in the bottle dropped slowly and steadily. When I felt I had achieved the perfect state of pleasant numbness, I switched off the light and tried to spin myself down into dreamless dark.

It didn't work. I was almost there when some reflex twitched and I was wide awake, panting, my eyes straining up into the darkness. Not a nightmare, no — a knowledge, a conviction. The *certainty* that Frank lay in the bed next to me, that his hollow head depressed the pillow next to my cheek, that if I had but the courage to turn my head, I would meet his white stare eyeball to eyeball.

I listened to my heart hammer and I couldn't do it. And then suddenly I did: my head whipped around and I looked. Nothing. Not even a dent in the pillow or a ruffle in the sheets.

Of course he couldn't get in. I had locked the door, hadn't I? I got up and checked it, then lay back down, this time on my side facing the empty half of the bed. Now I had only to open my eyes to reassure myself that he wasn't there, to avoid that terrifying paralysis of will.

An itch grew between my shoulder blades. He had come into the room silently, behind my back, past the faithless lock, and he was staring at me. I could feel his gaze on me like a touch — a slow, persistent, insistent touch.

I rolled over, thrashing out from under the covers. No Frank. Door still locked. But no way was I going to get to sleep. I sat up with my back to the headboard, bottle locked between my shins, the glass my first line

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of defense. I drank until gray light started to creep through the window, then dozed off with my head on my knees.

I woke stiff, hung-over, and with an urgent need to pee. I almost twisted the doorknob off the door before I remembered that it was locked, and why. A shower, mouthwash, and clean clothes made me feel marginally functional again. I headed downstairs with a swollen head and a bad attitude.

Frank and Mother were just finishing breakfast. Or rather, Mother was. Frank's scrambled eggs and bacon were untouched. He was sitting in *my* chair, the one on Mother's right, wearing some of Dad's old clothes. They fit him a little better than the blue suit.

"Good morning, dear," Mother said. "I hope you slept well."

Frank got up silently and walked around the table to the place on Mother's left. "You can have that chair, Jenny. I know it's your favorite. And the food. I don't need to eat," he said.

I looked at the chair and shuddered. The cadavers I had worked on in anatomy lab always felt greasy, their leathery skins coated with a thin film of fat dissolved by the formaldehyde. I imagined an oil slick on the chair seat. That, and the smell of Frank and the food almost completed the job on my stomach.

Dry toast, I thought. *I can handle dry toast*. I fixed myself a hangover special in the kitchen and chose a chair at the far end of the table from Mother and Frank. Mother looked hurt, but said nothing.

"So tell us, Frank," I said around a mouthful of crumbs, "why'd you come back? I heard it was only murder victims that were returning from the dead. But nobody killed you, Frank — you wrapped your car around that light pole all by yourself, right?"

"It was an accident," he said. I contemplated his hands, resting passively on the tablecloth. I had dissected hands. I thought about muscles, tendons, nerves, vessels, phalanges. Did he feel pain? I wondered. If I dissected his hands here, on the dining table, would he feel anything? Would I?

"You were drunk, weren't you, Frank?" I pressed.

"Yes, I was drunk."

"And it's just a miracle that you didn't kill someone else that night, isn't it?" I was beginning to enjoy this.

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"I should not have been driving," he agreed.

Mother's distress with the turn the conversation was taking was apparent. "Jenny, we don't need to dwell on the past."

But I refused to back off. "So, Frank — you weren't murdered, nobody ran you off the road — why are you here?"

He aimed those white balls straight at me. "For justice, Jenny. So justice can be done."

"What justice, Frank? Whose version of justice?"

"*That's enough*!" Mother's voice was shrill. I held my breath, waiting for her to break, but she regained control and continued in a brighter tone, "Why don't the three of us do something special today? We could go to a movie — Oh, it's so nice to have the family together again!"

Family? This? I choked down the last of my juice and hoped it wouldn't come right back up. "Sorry, Mom," I lied, "I promised some friends I'd drop by today. Gotta run."

I spun my car out of the driveway without bothering to look and picked a direction at random. The driving calmed me quickly. I've always felt safe in my car: late at night, drunk, high, driving through the worst neighborhoods or the ass-end of nowhere. I've taken some awful chances behind the wheel, but nothing can touch me. No one can touch me.

I meandered north through town and up U.S. 49 as far as DeSoto National Forest, then followed county roads and bayous past faux antebellum homes and live oaks heavy with moss, southeastward to Back Bay. Across the causeway into historic Biloxi, then a slow cruise along the beach on Highway 90 back to Gulfport. I drove past the cemetery, but I didn't go in to check Frank's spot in the family vault. I'd never visited it since the funeral; why start now?

By mid-afternoon I felt I could handle real food. I bought a shrimp po'boy and a six-pack at a deli, parked my car at the end of the airport runway, and watched the National Guard fighter pilots practice touch-and-go's while I ate. Frank had wanted to be a pilot; he had the eyesight and the steady nerves for it. The NROTC scholarship to Ole Miss had come through the week before he died.

The sandwich stayed down, thanks to the beers. When one of the pop tabs broke off in my fingers, I used the Swiss Army knife I keep in the car to open the can. Soon I had a pleasant buzz on.

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Mild air and late autumn sun flooded in the open car window. My eyes felt sandpapered. *I'll just rest them for a minute,* I thought as I leaned back in the seat. Even the scream of the jets couldn't keep me awake.

Screaming. Someone was screaming. *I* was screaming. It was dark, I was frightened, and I was screaming my outrage and fear at the top of my lungs. *Please. Don't.*

Frank and I had been playing Monopoly in the basement while Mom visited the Truetts next door for Sunday afternoon coffee. Some petty squabble over real estate had mushroomed into name-calling and shouting, and suddenly Frank had dashed up the steps and slammed the door behind him. The lock snicked, then the lights went out.

Seven-year-old logic was no match for the monsters my imagination could create to populate the darkness. *Things* were watching me, breathing on me, *touching* me. Panic burst from me in full-throated screams. Then suddenly there was light, and Frank hugging me hard. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry — Oh god, Jenny, I'm so sorry! It's all right, now — stop crying — please don't tell Mom — it's okay, now — stop crying." Over and over, until my screams died away and I realized I was safe.

"That's right — quiet now — you're okay — look, I've got something to show you."

"Show me again," I demanded. An earlier memory now. Christmas afternoon, Frank and I on the back steps, Mom and Dad and the Truetts watching football games on TV. I was — what? Five?

I adored my big brother. As far as I was concerned, Frank had hung the moon and set all the stars in the sky, just for me. Now I crowded close, shoulder to shoulder with him in the watery December light, and oohed and ahhed as he showed off the Swiss Army knife Dad had given him.

The knife blossomed under Frank's fingers like a steel flower. Two blades, a bottle opener with screwdriver, a hooked thing Frank said was a can opener. A corkscrew and a magnifier. From the other side, an awl, fish-scaler, nail file, and, incredibly, tiny scissors. Stuck into a clever slot in the end, a toothpick and a tweezer.

Everything open, displayed. The knife bristled, armed for bear. One by one, Frank closed, settled, inserted, until the miraculous package lay

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quiescent on his palm. It was my first experience with folded space. A fat bar of metal and red plastic, a white cross. How could all that fit in there?

"Again," I urged.

"Naw, you've seen enough." I reached for it, but he pulled his hand away. "No, you're too *young* to play with a knife like this. You'd hurt yourself, and Dad would have my hide."

"Would not!" But Frank wasn't listening. His eyes had gone remote at the thought of Dad's temper. He rolled the knife back and forth across his palm, then closed his fingers around it in a fist. The winter air was suddenly chill; I tried not to move or breathe or make a sound. *Please. Don't.*

Frank took a deep breath and a door opened somewhere behind his eyes. Tucking the knife away in his jacket pocket, he gave me a sunny smile. "You can play with things like this when you're *older*."

"You're old enough to know about things like this now, Jenny. Bet you and your girlfriends talk about it all the time."

I was scared and fascinated at the same time. Of course I knew I shouldn't be doing this, Mom would have a shitfit if she found us under the basement stairs like this — but the lure of forbidden knowledge was stronger than prohibition. And it couldn't hurt to just *look*, could it?

Frank *wanted* me to look. And when I had looked, he encouraged me to touch it. Hesitantly I reached out a finger. The soft texture surprised and repelled me at first, but then it got harder and larger. I wasn't sure I liked this lesson in folded space. I pulled my hand away and edged back toward the closet door.

"Don't stop. It's okay, it won't bite." He took my hand and put it back around his erection. "Like this — and this," he guided me.

He was my brother. What could it hurt? And I was full of an eleven-year-old's natural curiosity. I did what he asked, until he grunted and wetness filled my palm.

"*Gross!*" But I remembered to whisper.

"No, it's not. It's normal. Just wait a few years — you won't be able to get enough of it." He wiped my hand and himself with a handkerchief, then buttoned himself back up. I doubted his prognostication. Who would

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want to have that sticky stuff on them all the time? Were grown-ups weird, or what?

"Now show me yours," he said.

I was suddenly reluctant. I didn't know that would be the deal when he had called me into the dark space under the stairs and offered to show me something special.

"I don't want to," I said.

His hand closed like a trap around my wrist. "Do it, Jenny." He began to squeeze. "I showed you mine."

"*Okay*, darn it!" I rubbed the wrist he'd released, then pulled down my shorts and underpants. He lifted my shirtfront, touched the swells of my growing breasts, then lower. I was still unsure about the changes my body was beginning to undertake, very self-conscious about the seemingly huge growths on my chest and the sprouting forest of hair between my thighs. I expected taunts, but instead he said, "You're going to be a beautiful woman, Jenny."

His touch was gentle, pleasurable. As if reading my mind, he said, "You touch yourself at night, don't you, Jenny?"

I blushed in the dimness. "It's okay," he said, stroking lower. "Everyone does it. Show me how you do it."

He was my *brother*. It wasn't like he was some grotty pervert hanging around the school playground, trying to get me into his car. I guided his fingers. I was still developing this skill, and he was clumsy, but after a few minutes, a tiny spasm throbbed through my groin. I must have breathed funny, because Frank knew. He stopped rubbing, then let his fingers explore further back in my slickness. He found the opening of my vagina and tried to press his finger inside.

"*Ow! No!*" I slapped his hand away. "Don't do that!" I didn't think what we'd done so far was all that bad (though Mom would undoubtedly disagree if she found out — mothers were like that), but I knew that opening had to do with making babies. And *that*, I knew, was Trouble.

Frank withdrew his hand and let me go. That time. Later, other times, times he broadened his sexual experimentations, he wasn't so accommodating. *Please, don't*, I lay in the dark and begged him. But he always did, anyway.

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I lay in the dark and held my breath, listening to the bedroom door's bolt strain against the frame. I could imagine Frank's large, strong hand twisting the knob, twisting it as he sometimes twisted my wrists when I wouldn't cooperate. Fifteen years old, and putting all my trust in a fragile piece of metal. I lay in the dark and waited for the faithless lock to snap, as I sometimes waited for my wrists to snap. But the lock held. After a few moments I heard Frank release the knob, then his soft steps padding away down the hall.

All the air left me with a whoosh, and I started to shiver violently, freezing and sweating by turns, all the bedclothes pulled tight around me. When my body was exhausted, I fell into the deepest, soundest, most restful sleep I'd had in years.

I slept so late the next morning that I had to skip breakfast to get to school on time. Frank had already left; I was glad I didn't have to face him. I bought a banana at the Kwik-Pik to hold me until lunch and peeled it as I headed round the corner at a trot. I never saw what hit me.

Purple clouds in a pink sky. Green clouds in an orange sky. Then Frank's face swam into view; he grabbed my arm and hauled me to my feet. My mouth felt funny; I thought I had mashed banana all over it, but when I touched it, my fingers came away red.

I blinked at the blood as if I had never seen the color before. Frank shook me, hard. My head snapped up and down as I tried to focus on his face. "*Don't you ever do that again, you hear me?*" I tried to remember what I had done, but all I could think about was how much Frank's voice sounded like Dad's. Frank shook me again. "If you ever lock your door again — I'll *kill* you, Jenny. Understand?"

He let me go. My rubbery legs folded up beneath me and I sat down hard. "Clean yourself up," he said, throwing his handkerchief into my lap. I heard his boots crunching across the gravel as I stared stupidly at the dark drops falling onto my skirt.

I don't remember what excuse I gave the school office for my split lip and my stained clothing, but I remember that I was very late.

The telephone call came very late on a Friday night. At the hospital the doctors told us the impact had crushed Frank's chest and ruptured most of his organs. They pumped sixty-eight units of blood into him, and

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it all ran right back out. He died on the table, while the surgeons worked frantically to restore the proper configurations of his folded spaces.

His face — his handsome, charming face — was unscathed. Mother kissed him one last time, and told the doctors to take his eyes. Then she finally surrendered herself to a terrible grief.

What did *I* feel?

I felt like I'd had all the wind knocked out of me.

I felt scared.

I felt relieved.

I felt guilty.

I felt all alone.

I felt nothing at all.

I'll tell you how I felt: I felt free. And safe. *Safe.*

I WOKE SO suddenly that I banged my head against the car roof. The sun had set while I napped and the warm afternoon had turned into a chilly evening, but I was shivering from more than the cold as I rolled up the window and started the engine.

I had never buried the memory of Frank's abuses the way some people do to survive, but I didn't like to remember them. The pain ran too deep. The afternoon's dreams had been as sharp, as vivid, as hurtful as the original experiences; I felt more exhausted than when I nodded off.

The house was dark and deserted when I returned. Maybe Mother and Frank were still at the movies. With a pair of dark glasses, Frank probably looked no worse than any other hung-over holiday reveler. In the darkened theater who would know that there was a dead man in the next seat? Maybe many of the risen dead and their families had gone to the movies today. I pictured rows of impassive faces glowing a spectral blue in the light reflected from the screen. Which is the living here and which the dead?

I recognized the edge of hysteria in my muddled thoughts. I needed sleep, dreamless sleep — something alcohol couldn't give me. But it's not very difficult for a medical student to get what she needs. I locked the bedroom door and dug into the bottom of my overnight bag. The pill went down with a slug of whiskey and, a few minutes later, I went down the rabbit hole after it.

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I slept the clock around to the next afternoon and woke rested and ravenous. Again I was alone in the house. Where could Mother and Frank be now?

There was enough of the turkey left to make a decent-sized sandwich, and a fresh pan of Mother's famous brownies sat on the back of the stove. I took my dinner into the living room and settled into a comfortable chair with the bourbon at my elbow. Some perverse impulse made me pick up the family picture album and leaf through it as I ate.

Here was Dad, grinning and holding up a large Spanish mackerel after a successful Gulf fishing trip, and I, scarcely taller than the fish, struggling to lift its tail. A picture of me as a three-year-old, toddling after Dad with an armload of grass runners to plant in the bare earth of our new back yard when we had first moved to this house. Frank helping Mom and Dad plant azaleas while I operated the hose, watering bushes and workers indiscriminately. Frank at eight and me at five, dressed in our new Easter outfits, my hair in long braids tied off with silly little bows, Frank's carefully slicked-down hair starting to escape into his usual cowlick. His arm was thrown companionably around my shoulder; my arms were wrapped around an enormous bunch of Easter lilies he had given me. We looked happy, carefree — alive.

Tears threatened to start, and I blinked them away. After Dad had died I had transferred all my love and worship to Frank. Where had my beloved brother and protector gone? I had trusted him, and he had betrayed me. No justice could make up for that. None.

I was a third of the way through the bottle, half-way through the pan of brownies, and two-thirds through the album when Mother and Frank returned. Mother was rosy-cheeked and laughing from the cold as she shed a cheerful blizzard of hat, coat, scarf, and gloves; Frank followed her stolidly with a pile of packages.

"Jenny, darling — I'm so glad you're up at last! You should have come with us — the after-Thanksgiving sales were wonderful! We had a great time, didn't we, Frank? Oh, just put them over there on the couch, dear."

A new use for the dead, I thought: pack mules. Frank placed the boxes as ordered and settled into a chair across the room. I turned away from his white gaze.

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"Would you like a drink, Mom?" I asked, just to be polite.

"Why, I think I will have a little — just to warm up!" She giggled and patted at her hair. She looked so much younger today than when we had sat down to dinner — was it only the day before yesterday?

While I found a glass, Mother pounced on the photo album. It was opened to a picture of Frank in his high school football uniform, the day he'd been elected team captain. Tall, tanned, handsome, laughing into the camera, his wild red hair shining in the sun like a halo: a cheerleader's dream, a mother's joy.

"Oh, Frank!" She showed him the picture. "I was so *proud* of you that day. Your father would have been proud, too. I wish he had lived to see it." She brushed away what might have been a tear.

The saccharine sentiment was the last straw. I gagged on it and everything else I had swallowed over the years: Mother's favoritism toward Frank, my pride, Frank's abuse, his semen, my hate. At last, at *long* last, I vomited up my rage.

"You know, Frank, there's an old Oriental proverb: Two can keep a secret — if one is dead. But you just couldn't *stay* dead, could you, brother?" I walked unsteadily across the room to where he sat, leaned over, and sniffed ostentatiously. "Lord, my brother hath not lain in his grave for three days, wherefore he *stinketh*."

"Jennifer! You're *drunk!*"

Right-o, Mom. For once. Something about the way Dad's old trousers fit on Frank or the way he was sitting made him look sexless. I grabbed for his crotch, caught only a fistful of cloth, and laughed. "*Poor* Frank. What — are there rats in the family vault, brother? Have they been *chewing*?"

Mother grabbed me and spun me around. "*Out*! Get out of this house this minute!"

I savored the one word I had never dared say as it rolled off my tongue: "*No*. No, I don't think I'll do that." I knew she would slap me. I caught her hand in mid-swing, and looked down at Frank, who had sat as blank-eyed and inscrutable as a buddha throughout. "Tell her, *brother* — tell Mom our secret: Tell her what her perfect son did all those nights in my room."

He shook his head. "You must tell her, Jenny."

"But, Frank — you know she won't believe me. I tried to tell her, many times, but she just didn't want to know. Because then she just might have

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to do something about her 'darling baby boy,' who was screwing and sodomizing his sister on a regular basis! "

Mother went white — with anger? with shock? "It's not true," she whispered, looking to Frank for confirmation.

He never took his blank gaze off my face. "It is true," he said.

"And you knew it, too." I turned on her. "You *had* to have heard him, you *had* to have heard me crying, you *had* to have seen the stains on my sheets. Jesus Christ, Mother! — sometimes it was *blood!* You knew every time." She shook her head *No* but her panicked eyes said *Yes.*

"I don't know why I didn't get pregnant," I mused. "He never used any protection. I used to pray that I *would* get pregnant; then you'd have to believe me. But even that wouldn't have made you stop, would it, Frank? You just wouldn't *leave me alone.*"

I stared into my glass, found it empty, didn't refill it. "That last night I lay there like some towel you'd used, and I prayed to God that I would die. Then I prayed that you would die, and God answers prayer: that was the last night you ever laid a hand on me.

"So, tell me, Frank — why did you come back?"

"For justice, Jenny. So that justice could be done."

"*What* justice, Frank! *Whose* justice?"

Frank looked at Mother, broken and weeping. "Your justice, Jenny." He stood up. "I will be leaving now."

"Tell me this, first. Did you ever feel even a little bit guilty, Frank? Did you wrap your car around that pole on purpose?"

He paused with his hand on the door. "It's been a long time, Jenny. I don't remember. Think that, if it helps."

"Will I be rid of you for good this time, Frank?"

"No, Jenny. I don't think you will ever be rid of me."

"You *bastard!*" The glass left my hand and slammed into the side of his head with a dull crunch. A moment later I heard the front door open and close.

I looked at the bottle of bourbon and shuddered. Mother was still crying. I went over to her and put a hand on her shoulder, but she didn't respond. After a minute I followed Frank out the front door.

I sat on the step feeling utterly sober, hollow and weightless, and watched him walk down the street in the direction of the cemetery. The

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dent my glass had left in his skull had made his remaining hair stick up like his old cowlick. He looked so alone. The way I felt.

I remembered another step, another time, a warm shoulder next to mine, a cowlicked head bent low, with mine, over something marvelous and strange. The tears started at last.

My brother — o my brother — was dead.

"Can you believe it? They're now cloning monkeys."

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Michael Carr hails from Springville, Utah, and attended the Clarion workshop in 1993. He notes with pleasure that this story, his first professional sale, was inspired in no small part by the behavior of his black Laborador retriever, Helaman, who seems to be convinced that the paper boy is up to something most sinister. What Snuffles encounters is far more diabolical in the following tale, which begs the question of whether every dog truly does have his day.

A Dog's Night

By Michael Carr

SNUFFLES WAS A GOOD DOG. Not a very smart dog. In fact, just smart enough to know that he didn't know the half of what the masters were up to. But when Boss said "Good dog," he wagged his tail and thought, "Yes, I am a pretty good dog."

Which is why the creatures digging in the back yard bothered him so much. All night, he could hear them scratching in the garden, and during the day he could smell their rotten scent all through the yard. One night when Boss didn't bring him inside at the regular time, he saw one peek its gnarled, horny head from one of the holes. Its lips curled into a mossy leer.

Snuffles shot toward the front yard, yelping and trailing a string of pee like a naughty puppy. When Boss heard his barks, he called Snuffles inside, and the dog obeyed, still shaking with fright.

Every night, Snuffles barked when he heard the creatures digging, but Boss didn't seem to understand.

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"Shut up!" he said, putting down his newspaper in disgust. "You'll wake the baby."

"But Boss," Snuffles moaned. "Boss, Boss...in the *yard*, Boss. Go look. Go look."

He looked to Bitch-With-Pup for understanding, but she just looked disgusted and turned back to feeding the Pup its bottle.

Boss said, "Stop whining, or you're sleeping outside."

That much Snuffles understood, and he certainly did not want to sleep outside, near the creatures and the work they did at night, so he went into the bedroom and lay down on his pillow, head on paws. Outside, the maddening sound of the creatures digging continued unabated.

The next day, Snuffles followed Boss out to work in the garden. Boss filled the wheelbarrow with compost and started to shovel it onto the carrot patch.

"What's this?" Boss leaned against the shovel and eyed the holes with a frown. Snuffles wagged his tail anxiously.

"Looks like those damn gophers came back."

Not Those-Damn-Gophers. Snuffles liked Those-Damn-Gophers. They were fun to chase. He couldn't smell them anywhere. He couldn't even smell You-Mangy-Cat. The creatures must have eaten him, too.

Boss went to the shed and brought back the box with the bad, don't-eat pellets. He poured some in the first few holes, then shook the box and grunted.

"I'll tell you what, Snuffles," Boss said. "I'll run down to Stanley Seed and get some more gopher bait. You keep an eye on things until I get back." He pointed to the holes.

Snuffles let out an inadvertent moan, "No, please." His tail crept unhappily between his legs.

"That's right. Good dog."

Snuffles took his guarding duties quite seriously. When You-Mangy-Cat came slinking into the yard to spray its scent, Snuffles happily chased it away. When Boy-on-the-Bike banged a rolled-up paper against the door, Snuffles roared in from the back yard to chase the boy away before he disturbed Boss. But today Snuffles was scared.

Boss's car crunched its way out of the driveway. The dog hunkered down to wait about ten feet from one of the holes.

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"Snuffles," a low voice said from the hole. "Snuffles, are you hungry?"

Snuffles cocked his head and looked at the hole. He let out a low growl.

One of the creatures popped its head from the hole. Snuffles growled again. He wanted to run inside and hide behind the couch, but Boss had told him to wait.

Another creature looked out from a second hole. "Are you hungry Snuffles?" More creatures appeared.

They were all munching on something. After every bite they licked their chops and belched as if it were the most delicious meal they'd ever eaten. The first creature, who looked bigger and mossier than the others, and had long, curved horns, held out a hand for Snuffles to see.

Steak! Partially cooked and fatty like the tidbits Boss or Bitch-With-Pup fed him from the stove. Only these were big pieces. The rich, meaty smell filled the air, overpowering the creatures' sickly odor. He took two steps forward.

"That's right, Snuffles," the big, mossy one said. "Yummy, yum, yum, yum." It licked its lips with a narrow, darting tongue.

The creatures didn't look so threatening, Snuffles realized. No, they looked downright friendly with those wide smiles. He must have judged them wrong, that's all. He wagged his tail and took another step forward.

"Good boy. See, we're your friends. What a good dog." It dangled the steak in front of Snuffles' nose.

Snuffles' mouth felt wet and slobbery. He swallowed his saliva, licked his chops and leaned toward the meat. He would snatch up a piece, then run back to the lawn and eat it. He opened his mouth.

The creature leaned forward slightly, an eager look on its face, and the dog hesitated. Underneath the rich steak smell, he could smell something nasty.

He jumped back with a yelp. They weren't eating steaks at all, he could see, but were munching on the bad, don't-eat pellets Boss had poured in the hole. *Poison.*

The first time Snuffles had smelled the pellets, he'd dug down into one of Those-Damn-Gophers' holes after them. A few minutes later, he felt weak and sick all over. He threw up behind the pee-tree, then lay down

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on the porch panting. Boss had found him and rushed him to the nasty place where they stuck you with needles and stuck things up your butt.

"Get out of here!" Snuffles shouted. "I'll kill you! I'll rip your arms out!"

The creatures opened their mouths and made a sound like banging on cans with sticks. Laughing.

"You're a dead dog," the big one said. The leader.

"We're taking over."

"A coup."

"We'll kill the man and his woman."

"Rip down his house."

"Take the baby."

"You'd better not sleep tonight."

Snuffles whined and crept further back. He didn't understand, but he knew that the creatures were Very Bad.

The creatures popped back into their holes. Shortly, the digging sounds resumed. He could feel them under his feet. They were everywhere in the yard.

Snuffles shouted over and over, until the others in the neighborhood joined in a chorus of barks and howls, and the masters came out of their houses and hollered for the dogs to shut up.

THAT NIGHT SNUFFLES slept between the two bedrooms. He jolted awake at every sound and growled.

"Quiet, Snuffles," Bitch-With-Pup said from the darkness.

Boss snored loudly. Good. Bitch-With-Pup wouldn't bother crawling out of bed to send him outside.

Eventually, Snuffles fell asleep and dreamed.

"Snuffles. Snuffles."

Busy chasing a rabbit across a field, the dog paused when he heard his name called. He saw Boss waving the frisbee on the other side of the field.

"Snuffles. Wake up Snuffles," Boss said. But his voice sounded funny. It sounded like one of the creatures.

Snuffles awoke with a start.

"Snuffles. Are you awake?"

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He cocked his head. A bit of moonlight shone through the kitchen window and onto the carpeted threshold between the two bedrooms where Snuffles lay. He couldn't see where the voice came from, but it sounded close.

"Over here, Snuffles."

He climbed to his feet and looked down the heating vent. The voice seemed to come from down there. He whined. Maybe it was Boss, playing a joke. Yeah, a trick. Boss liked to play sometimes.

"We're here, Snuffles. We came like we promised."

No. It wasn't a trick.

Snuffles turned and looked toward the bedroom. The Pup slept quietly in its crib. He turned back to the hole and growled.

The creatures went quiet.

In the masters' bedroom, the snoring stopped. He could hear Boss shift a little in his bed. The snoring started again.

"Stop growling," Bitch-With-Pup warned from the darkened bedroom. "Go to sleep."

He turned back to the vent. It was quiet.

A few minutes passed.

A sudden movement caught his eye. The leader of the creatures stood on the counter next to the sink, behind the glasses Bitch-With-Pup had lined up on a towel to dry. It beckoned for Snuffles to come closer.

Carefully, Snuffles climbed to his feet and made his way across the kitchen floor. He didn't want to bark and wake up the masters until he was sure the creature couldn't slip away and hide. There had to be proof.

"Snuffles," the creature whispered. "I bet you really want to bite me, don't you?"

A low growl came to the dog's lips. He suppressed it.

The creature had made a mistake, Snuffles could see. It stood too far onto the towel, the edge of which dangled over the counter. One tug on the edge, and the creature would come spilling to the ground, Snuffles would grab it, and Boss would see.

He stepped forward, tilting his head curiously. With a snarl, he leapt forward, grasping the towel in his teeth and jerking backwards with his head.

The creature moved impossibly fast. It leapt nimbly to one side, then

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with a second leap, jumped to the stove, where it slid between the stove and the wall. As it did, it laughed.

Too late, Snuffles tried to stop his pull. The glasses poised on the edge of the counter for a moment, then slid down towards his head, one after another. They rained down on him in a series of crashes.

In an instant, the light came on and Boss stood glaring at him. Boss stared at the glass on the floor with a terrible look on his face.

It wasn't him. Couldn't Boss see?

Boss marched into the front room, opened the door and pointed. "Out."

Snuffles slinked toward Boss, tail unhappily between his legs. He hesitated. Boss grabbed him by the collar and started to drag him outside.

Snuffles glanced over his shoulder and saw creatures boiling from the vent in the kitchen like a swarm of oversized rats. Some had horns, others arms that hung to their feet, long claws on the end of their hands. Their eyes glowed red in the dark, and they made their way toward the bedroom in a quiet line. The big one turned to Snuffles and sneered.

Snuffles struggled against the hand on his collar. He growled and barked. What were they up to?

"What are you barking at?" Boss asked in his disgusted voice. He didn't turn around to look. "Do you hear rocks rattling in your head?"

And suddenly Snuffles realized. Boss was wrong. He had made a mistake. The thought stunned him for a moment, and he didn't know what to do.

He turned and snapped at Boss. His teeth clamped down on the fleshy part of the man's hand. With a cry of pain Boss released the collar and jumped backwards.

Snuffles ran through the front room, then scrambled over the slick kitchen floor and into the Pup's bedroom. Behind him, Boss yelled and cursed.

The creatures were scaling the side of the crib. Long hands reached through the slats and grabbed at the Pup. One of them jumped inside. It pulled back the blanket and wrapped its claw around the sleeping Pup's ankle.

"Get away!" he shouted.

He ran into the bedroom, barking and biting at the creatures. He

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grabbed one by the arm and threw it from the crib. Its skin felt tough and chewy like the bicycle tire he'd found in the shed, only it burned his mouth.

They scratched him with sharp claws, and bit him on the flanks. He yelped his pain, and turned his jaws to snap back. They were all over him, too many. He dragged one from the side of the crib and bent down to tear its throat out.

The light flicked on. The creatures disappeared down the vent in the Pup's room. The grate slipped quietly into place behind them. Too fast. Boss stood in the threshold.

"What the hell are you doing?" Boss yelled, blinking against the light. He rubbed his hand where the dog had bitten it.

Snuffles crouched on the floor. He looked around for the creatures; they were nowhere to be seen. The Pup started to cry in its crib.

"That does it." Boss reached down and grabbed him roughly by the collar. "Now you're sleeping in the shed."

Wrapping herself in a bathrobe, Bitch-With-Pup came in. Snuffles whined at her, hoping she would understand. She picked up the Pup and clutched it against her chest.

"What is wrong with him?" she asked Boss.

Boss shrugged. "I don't know. He broke the glasses, he woke the baby. He *bit* me."

"No," Snuffles whined. "No, not hurt. Good dog."

"Oh, Snuffles," she said. "What is wrong with you? First the glasses, and now this?"

They had an awful look on their faces. It was the look of betrayed trust. The same look they'd given him last winter when he'd chewed up Boss's leather glove, only a hundred times worse. Snuffles felt sick and weak all over.

Boss dragged him out to the shed.

"Bad dog. Bad dog. Bad. Why don't you understand? Now you have to sleep in the shed."

The door banged shut behind him and Snuffles could hear the latch draw shut.

His skin burned. He could feel where the creatures had bitten and clawed him. But when he leaned over to lick the wound, his skin was

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whole. He wanted to lie down and sleep, and forget the sound of mistrust in Boss's voice.

How had he been so stupid? They had tricked him into getting thrown out. He'd thought they wanted to break a few things, and really they wanted to steal the Pup.

He had to save it.

Something tapped against the window above Boss's worktable. Snuffles looked up to see red eyes staring back at him. It was the leader with the long horns and the mossy face.

"Ha! Ha! Snuffles," it said through the glass. "You've lost."

He growled.

"Oh, what are you going to do?" it sneered. "Bark at me? I'm scared, Snuffles. Terrified."

The creature disappeared.

He ran over to stand against the table and press his nose against the glass. Row after row of red eyes crawled into the holes in the garden; underneath were the tunnels that crept up under the house.

There were two ways to get out of the shed, Snuffles had discovered. The first was the door — latched firmly shut when Boss left. The second was the window; if Boss left it open, he could leap onto the table and squeeze through. But it was closed.

They were coming. Any minute they would squeeze through the vent and grab the Pup. They would swarm over the bed and kill the masters.

Snuffles trotted to the far side of the shed. He eyed the window for a moment, then broke into a run. He leapt onto the table and smashed into the window.

Crack! His head smacked painfully against the glass. It cracked all the way across but didn't break outward like he'd hoped.

He jumped down from the table, snorting and shaking his head. A ringing sound filled his ears.

He ran to the other side of the shed and charged the window again. This time it broke apart, shards of glass tinkling to the ground below. The hole was big enough for his head, and widened as he squeezed his body through. Razor sharp fingers sliced his skin in a dozen places along his back.

He fell to the ground and jumped to his feet.

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The nasty smell filled the yard. He could hear them under his feet, crawling through their tunnels. He heard a sound like the Pup crying.

Growling angrily, he sniffed on the ground. Just under his feet, he could hear sounds: the creatures scrabbling under the ground, the Pup whimpering. This was the main tunnel.

He dug furiously into the grass. In an instant, he had burst into their tunnel. The creatures growled and scratched at his snout with long claws. They tried to pull the Pup through, but the tunnel had collapsed enough that the Pup wouldn't fit.

Snuffles grabbed the Pup by its sleeper and pulled it onto the grass. The creatures screamed and pulled on the Pup's feet. The Pup had a glazed look in its eyes. It whimpered a little, but didn't cry. Something was wrong with it.

"Snuffles!" Boss shouted.

He stood off the back porch, looking at the dog. He wore his bathrobe and slippers and had an angry look on his face.

"What are you doing?"

The Pup whimpered again. It lay on the ground at Snuffles's feet, its face cut and scratched.

Boss shouted angrily and came toward Snuffles with his hand outstretched.

"No, Boss. No. Not hurt Pup. Look!"

Boss saw the ring of red eyes standing just out of Snuffles's reach, the eyes looking up from the hole.

"What the hell?" Boss said. He stood, shaking. "Snuffles, what is it?"

The big creature with the horns said, "Go back to bed."

"Who are you?" Boss said. "What do you want?" His voice sounded afraid.

The big creature said, "The baby. Give us the baby."

"The baby?" Boss asked. His voice sounded funny, like something was stuffed in his mouth.

"No," Snuffles said. "Not hurt the Pup." He stood protectively over the Pup, who was strangely quiet, much like Boss. He didn't know if this was a test, or if there was something wrong with Boss.

"You stay out of this, dog," one of the creatures snarled. They turned back to Boss. "Give us the baby, and we'll leave you alone."

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Boss stood stiffly. Something *was* wrong. He was quiet for a moment. It was as if someone had hit him over the head. "Take the baby."

The creatures surged forward, hissing and clacking their teeth.

"No!" Snuffles shouted. "I'll kill you all."

The creatures attacked.

Snuffles seized the first in his jaws and shook it back and forth. It screamed and clawed at his eyes. He tossed it back into the pack.

Boss stood, unmoving.

"Wake up!" Snuffles shouted. He bit Boss on the leg, hard. The man shouted.

But it seemed to jolt him from his stupor. He shouted and kicked at the creatures.

"Rick," Bitch-With-Pup cried from behind them. "What is happening?"

"Get in the car!" he screamed at Bitch-With-Pup. "Take the baby and lock the doors. And don't look out the windows. Don't look at them."

"What?" she asked. "What are you talking about?"

And then she saw.

She kicked her way through the creatures, snatched up the Pup and ran toward the car. It was parked in the driveway about thirty feet away around the side of the house. Snuffles heard the door slam shut. The creatures screamed and gnashed their teeth.

There were too many of them, and they were too strong.

Boss fought ferociously — that's why he was *Boss*, after all — but the creatures kept coming.

The big one laughed. He stood on the patio, watching.

He was the one who had to be stopped, Snuffles realized. None of the others mattered.

The dog broke through the creatures surrounding him. One latched onto his leg, but he threw it aside. Snuffles reached the patio.

"Come on," the big one shouted. "Come on. I'll kill you. I'll tear you apart." It ran at Snuffles, clawed hands outstretched.

Snarling, the dog leapt to meet the creature. He grabbed it in his jaws, and shook it, even as it tore at his muzzle.

"No," Snuffles growled between shakes of his head. "I'll kill *you*."

It struggled and screamed. The creature hooked one of its horns along

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the dog's face, narrowly avoiding his eye, but Snuffles knew if he let go, the creature would slip away into the night and he wouldn't get another chance.

Blood splattered on his muzzle, and he didn't know if it was his or the creature's, but he didn't stop biting and shaking until the creature hung limply in his mouth.

The yard became suddenly quiet. Boss stood gasping, and the rest of the creatures stood back a pace, their eyes on the dog and their dead leader.

Snuffles growled.

Suddenly, the creatures turned and fled to their holes, disappearing as quickly as they'd come. A few stayed behind, dead or wounded.

Boss got his axe from the shed. He chopped at the dead and dying creatures until a wet sheen dripped from the blade. Snuffles sniffed out one that hid in the long grass by the shed, and caught another trying to crawl back to its hole. He tore it in half. His mouth burned.

The sun crept into the sky, and as it did, the bodies shriveled like worms on hot asphalt. Boss stood and looked over the yard. He wiped his bathrobe against his face, then his hands on the grass.

Boss said, "We'll pour gas down the holes and burn the little bastards out."

So that's what the creatures were. The-Little-Bastards.

"Yeah, Boss. Yeah."

"And if that doesn't work, we'll shove the hose down there and drown them. And if they're still there, we'll bring a backhoe in here and root them out."

Scratches covered Boss's legs, but he didn't seem to notice. He looked down at the dog. Snuffles cringed a little, sure that the punishment for breaking out of the shed would be swift and severe now that The-Little-Bastards had been defeated. But instead Boss bent and scratched Snuffles's ears with both hands, carefully avoiding the dog's wounds.

"You *are* a good dog. I'm sorry I doubted you." He looked over the dog's body. "Poor boy, you're hurt, aren't you?"

Snuffles's heart leapt with joy. He *wouldn't* be punished. His tail wagged furiously.

Bitch-With-Pup got out of the car, the Pup sleeping in her arms.

She said, "What a good dog. I think he deserves a reward, don't you Rick?"

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"Sure," Boss said. "A big reward."

"What do you want Snuffles? A nice juicy steak? How about we go camping next weekend, if you're healed up enough by then?"

Boss scratched his head again. "She's right, boy. Anything you want. What will it be?"

Snuffles panted excitedly. "Oh boy, oh boy. I want to sleep on the bed."

The masters looked at him.

Bitch-With-Pup said, "I think he tried to say something."

"What was that, Snuffles?" Boss asked.

Snuffles panted. "I want to sleep on the bed. Every night. On the bed. On the bed!"

But of course the masters didn't understand. They never did.

"It's solid...loaded with preservatives. They just don't build them that way any more."

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Last March, Laurel Winter gave us the gentle fantasy story "David's Ashes." She returns now with a tale of two sisters, a melancholy story, yet one that leaves a lingering sweet taste.

Tomorrow Tea

By Laurel Winter

ANZY WOKE ME. "TRY THIS," she said, putting a cup to my mouth just as I exhaled a dream breath. Too hot, but my mouth barely noticed. Summer, I tasted. Being young. One of the wild cousins of mint. Sun filtered through green leaves.

"Oh, yes," I said, gulping down as much as I could before she took the cup away. She never let me have a whole cup of any tea. Just tastes, so I would never be satisfied. A good taster is never satisfied. "What do you call it?"

She smiled. "Seventh Summer. Do you think that's right? Something that evokes childhood. Actually, I was thinking more of being eight, but I liked the esses."

"Seventh Summer." I tasted the name, too. In my sister's business, the brewing of names is almost as important as the brewing of teas. "That's good." I coughed on the last word, and Sister let me have another sip of summer tea. I held it in my mouth for a moment before I

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swallowed, savoring youth, wellness, warmth. When it was gone, though, I shivered.

"Poor darling," she said, pulling the green and gold afghan up to my chin and tucking me in. "I shouldn't have wakened you, but the tea buyer is coming tomorrow and I wanted to get this ready. Forgive me."

I just nodded and closed my eyes. The afghan is one I made as a girl and stored in my wedding chest. Anzy fetched it a few years ago, shook out the cedar chips, brought it to my bed. Perhaps I should have called the box of hopeful belongings a funeral chest instead.

"Are you well enough to try another tea?"

Her voice poked a hole in the sleep that was forming around me. I opened my eyes again. Her long gray hair was pinned back haphazardly, as usual. She envied my hair, I knew, soft silver curls. I kept it short, because lying on a pillow all the time would tangle long hair. Anzy cut my hair for me; sometimes I suspected she cut it crooked out of jealousy, but it still looked good. Hair was such a small thing to envy, when she had everything else. "Of course, dear sister. Bring another tea."

When she brought it, I could tell from the scent that it was one of her dark teas. I almost refused, but she brought it up to my lips firmly and tipped the cup. If I didn't drink, it would spill on my afghan and the scent would be with me for days and the stain forever — or at least for as much of forever as I was going to be permitted to attend.

I opened my lips and let the tea in. Bitter. Salted with tears. Cool as the earth at grave depth. But curiously, the flavor lightened as it passed through my mouth, the bitter and salt transforming into a soft, new flavor that kissed my tongue and evaporated, leaving pure, cool water to flow down my throat.

She didn't ask me if I liked it. "Does it work?" Her fingers were nervous around the cup. "It's called 'Beyond.'"

I just nodded, too tired to compliment her further, too tired to taste another tea. I closed my eyes and let the sleep take me away from the bed and the tea and the sister with long gray hair.

When I woke up, the tea buyer was there, tasting the new teas, getting reacquainted with a few old favorites he had almost forgotten. "Ah," he said, "I'll take as much Night Silk as you have."

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"You'll take it if you give enough of the right things," said Anzy, her voice daring and teasing and coquettish. Which of course the tea buyer didn't notice. He was young and strong and rakish, even though he wasn't handsome. What interest would he have in an old woman with untidy gray hair?

I saw him through the sheer curtain that separated my room from the kitchen. He was sitting on the bench at the side of the table, on the end farthest from my room. His expression stayed serious and businesslike. "Oh, I'm sure I have plenty of things to trade. New silks, fine dried seafish, sweet spices and sour, something for your sister." He looked toward the curtain then, although I'm sure he couldn't see me in the darkened room. That's another thing my sister envies; the tea buyer always asks about me and sometimes gives me a small gift: usually a book. I cannot read the books anymore; my hands tire, and my eyes, and my mind. But I still treasure the thought of the words I haven't read, what they might say....

Anzy tossed her head. "You'll have to have all that and more to go away with my fine new teas."

Ah, so I hadn't slept through the tasting of the new teas. I inched myself up on the pillow, to see better. Anzy set five stone jars on the table, warm from the oven, not too close to one another. Into each she put a pinch of a new tea. Then boiling water from the long-spouted kettle into the first jar and the last. I shuddered, knowing that would be the dark new tea, the one to drink cool. I wanted to taste it again, and yet I didn't. The tea buyer bent over the first stone jar and took in the aroma as it brewed. His eyes closed as he concentrated.

When the tea was brewed to my sister's satisfaction, she put a net over a clean cup and poured the tea. I wondered — as always — how she could stand to hold the hot jars in her bare hands, but she is a brewer, and has done it so many times she doesn't notice anymore. Just as the tea buyer doesn't notice when the tea is hot enough to scald a lesser tongue.

While he was bringing the cup to his lips, she moved to the end of the table and poured the last cup, to sit and cool.

I could tell he was curious over this, for most of her teas are for drinking hot. His eyes followed her as she poured, but then he brought himself back to the cup in his hands.

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I like to try to predict which tea he is tasting by the expression on his face as it enters his mouth: surprised or pleased or shocked or whatever. This time, there was just mild satisfaction, so I guessed Twilight Garden, which I found adequate, but a bit boring. "I call this Twilight Garden," she said, when he didn't speak.

"Ah," he said, but no more, scooting down the bench to sit before the second jar. My sister frowned, erased the expression, and poured the second jar.

This time it was Seventh Summer and the tea buyer fell in love with it. "Yes, yes," he said, "I can sell this tea." He even allowed himself to take a second sip, and a third. My sister waited, looking smug, until he moved to the third jar.

Coming Home, it was; a mix of familiar and strange. And the fourth was Rejoice. The tea buyer liked both of them, although not as well as Seventh Summer.

And then it was time for the last cup. My sister held her hand above the cup, checking the temperature. "Wait," she said. The tea buyer waited, sniffing the air above the cup for its dark aroma. I'm sure my sister let him wait longer than was necessary, to build his anticipation.

He was at the nearest end of the bench now, just beyond the sheer curtain. I could smell the tea from my bed — or at least imagine that I did. My sister tested the temperature again, then curled her fingers around the cup and gave it to him.

I saw the bitterness bite him, the sad saltiness, and then his eyes widened at the sudden touch of flavor that vanished even as he met it. He looked toward the curtain; perhaps he saw me, lying in the darkness ready to die.

"Beyond," whispered my sister. He did not take a second taste, but he nodded to her, to acknowledge the power of the tea.

My sister cleared the jars away while he went out for his goods. She hurried, spilling some of the Seventh Summer tea; it smelled like life itself. After she wiped it up, she peeked around the edge of the curtain and saw me lying awake. "Did you see?" she whispered. "He loved them all."

"Except the Twilight Garden," I said. "He won't buy any of that."

She sniffed. "He'll buy some. Now why don't you nap for a while; you're bound to be tired."

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I wanted to see the trading. "No," I said, although I was. "Open the shutter for me."

She did, although she clearly didn't want to. When the shutter was open, one could see in through the door curtain as easily as out. Whenever I was awake, the tea buyer always came in for a moment and talked with me and gave me a gift. Anzy banged the shutter to one side and left the room.

The door curtain was still swaying when he entered the kitchen with his bulging pack. "Greetings," he called to me. "I hope we did not wake you with our dealing out here."

"No," I said. "No, I was awake."

He smiled and thumped the pack down on the cleared table. "I have something for you."

"Don't bother giving her a book," said my sister, her voice cold. "She hasn't read the last ones yet — and won't ever."

The tea buyer looked at me, and saw the truth of her words. "Oh, it isn't a book," he said, although I could tell he was lying. "I brought you something else this time." I could see him thinking fast. "First I must do my trading with your sister, though."

Her face flushed, and that was gift enough for me. He had business dealings with my sister; he didn't *have* to talk to me.

She was angry, so she didn't trade well. The tea buyer tried to tease her out of it, but she didn't let go. I saw the point where his lips tightened up and he decided to use her anger against her. She was too angry to see.

I felt a hollow pleasure, watching them. The tea buyer was getting the advantage, because she couldn't think well with the anger in her head. And the envy. There is something to be said for being envied, but she was getting less dried fish — which I love — and less of everything else as well. I tried to think of a way to help her, but I was so tired, and I had to save the energy to stay awake for my present.

I saw the small book that he had been planning to give to me; he whisked it back into his pack as soon as it turned up. Was he lingering over the wares as he traded, deciding what would be my gift?

He did not take any of the Twilight Garden. He took fifty packets each of Coming Home and Rejoice, all of the Seventh Summer, and all but one of the Beyond, as well as a good assortment of her older teas. For this he

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gave silks and spices and dried fish and meat and fruits and some pressed paper and deep blue ink — but not as much of any of them as she deserved for her creations. She just wanted him to pack up and go away, I could tell, and he began to do so. He packed up the teas in tight bundles and placed them in the far interior, where there was no chance of them getting wet, even if the pack fell in a river. He packed up the extra fruits and meats and the rolls of cloth — except for one. He put one in his pocket and my heart leaped.

And I was right. After he had his pack tied, he came through the curtain and sat right on the edge of the bed. "You can't lie there reading all the time," he said. "It will spoil your eyes." He reached into the pocket and pulled out a piece of silk, blue and blue and blue, a dozen different colors of blue, and worked with threads of silver. "This will go with your blue eyes and your silver hair." He actually lifted my head up with warm hands and tied the silk loosely around my neck, with the ends trailing down to my hands so I could feel it between my fingers.

I couldn't do more than smile my thanks. Sleep crept over me and wrapped me in silk.

WHEN I WOKE UP, the tea buyer was gone.

Anzy had put away all the goods she'd bartered for and was sitting at the table creating a new tea with my silk tied around her head, hiding her dull, gray hair. She looked almost beautiful, with the silk accenting her blue eyes.

"It's mine," I said, trying to sit up.

She looked at me through the curtain, and untied the silk. "Of course. You were asleep. I didn't think you'd mind." She came in, draped the silk over me like a blanket.

I minded. "You will have it soon enough, when I am dead."

There was a silence deeper than her darkest tea. We did not talk about my dying; it had been happening so slowly for so long — since we were girls, really. Now it was near, and I knew it, and so did she. She had brewed it into her latest tea. I gathered the silk in my hands. "Let me have it as long as I am able, my last gift from the tea buyer." I was tired again, my eyelids falling shut as she nodded.

* * *

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My time was spent in sleep, in tiny moments of waking, in sips of tea and my sister's hands stroking my face with the edge of the silk — when she wasn't bathing me, or changing the bedclothes. Or working in the kitchen. She was brewing a new tea, something difficult; sometimes I would open my eyes for a few seconds, just in time to see her dump her attempts thus far and start over. Sometimes she would be crying.

And then she woke me, my head held in the crook of her arm, the other hand holding a cup of tea. "Taste this," she said. "I made it for you." She held it to my lips. "Taste it."

The new tea seared my lips, too hot again. It burned my tongue with promise, a flavor that built up and up and up until you knew there was no end to it, no end to anything. Sweet and sour and bitter and salt — all of them together, but mainly sweet. I asked a question with my eyes. "Tomorrow Tea," she said. "I call it Tomorrow Tea."

"He'll buy it," I whispered. She gave me another sip, and when I had swallowed, another. The taste built forever in my mouth: cities that would never fall, infinite gardens, the wind and the sea. She helped me drink the entire cup, leaving me full of tomorrow. "Wear the silk," I murmured. I moved one hand, to try and give it to her, but the effort made me sleep again.

I did see the tea buyer again, for just an instant. Did I hang onto life until he came again? Was I already dead? Did the Tomorrow Tea give me a glimpse of time yet to come? The tea buyer sat beside my sister at the long table. She wore the silk on her head. They both drank cool, dark, bitter tea that turned to water in the back of their throats and left a fleeting taste of wonder. There was a curtain between us.

And I was there and then gone, with the taste of tomorrow carrying me into something other than sleep as my eyes closed.

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SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

WATCH THE SKIES!

OUR TITLE this month comes from that classic SF flick, *The Thing*, produced by Howard Hawks, based on John W. Campbell, Jr.'s short story "Who Goes There?" In the movie, the phrase is a warning. After the alien creature that has menaced a polar expedition is defeated, a reporter admonishes the folks back home to: "Watch the skies! Watch everywhere. Keep on looking. Watch the skies!"

At the Exploratorium, San Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception, we agree — you really should watch the skies — but we think of the phrase as an invitation, rather than as a warning. One of the things we specialize in is taking a second look at things that other people take for granted and learning to notice and experiment with phenomena that most people overlook. If you watch the skies, you're likely to see some common — and a few uncommon — optical phenomena in the form of rainbows, halos, sun dogs, and the elusive green flash.

THAT POT OF GOLD

What, for instance, can you notice if you take the time to examine a rainbow — whether it's in your sprinkler or in a distant thundershower?

As a reader of science fiction and fantasy, you've probably attempted to approach the end of the rainbow. Oh, come on — admit it. If you're a fantasy reader, you could have been looking for the pot of gold; if you're a science fiction reader, you might claim you were experimenting with optics. Of course, your attempt was a failure; you discovered you can't reach the rainbow's end. As you approach a rainbow, it appears to move away, keeping that fantastic pot of gold forever out of reach.

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Here's an experiment to try the next time you see a rainbow. Point to the top of the rainbow's arc and have a friend do the same. (If there's no friend nearby, hail a stranger and get him to do it. He might think you're mad, but that's OK. Paul involves strangers in science experiments all the time and makes new friends this way.) If you try this experiment, you'll find that you and your friend are pointing to different places. Your arms are parallel and you are pointing to different locations. That's because you and your friend are seeing different rainbows. When you take a step toward the rainbow, the rainbow doesn't really move. Every time you move, you see a different rainbow, one that appears to be in a different place.

To explain how this works, we need to get down to basics. You probably learned many years ago that a rainbow is made of light, nothing but light. The white light of the sun contains all the colors of the visual spectrum. When sunlight shines at an angle from air into water, it bends or *refracts*. When sunlight bends, each color bends by a different amount. Red light bends a little, green light bends more, and blue light bends even more. When sunlight shines into a water drop, the light bends a little and when it bounces back out, it bends a little more. Since each color bends by a different amount, all this bending separates the white light into its component colors.

That's the basic idea. But to really understand what's going on, you need to take those basics a little farther. Sure, the water drops separate the colors of light, but what does that have to do with what you see out there?

Bob Miller, an artist who has built many of the Exploratorium's most popular optics exhibits, likes to say that you see light. In fact, he says, light is the only thing you see.

Bob's right. You see the world out there because light bounces off stuff in the world and gets into your eyes. Your eye and brain use this light to construct a picture of the world. A rainbow isn't a thing; it's just reflected light. When you look at a rainbow, your eye and brain take the colored light reflecting from inside water drops and construct a colored arc that looks just as real as anything else you see. And it is just as real in one sense: Your eyes are intercepting light and making a picture — that light could be reflecting from a water drop or a brick wall, and that doesn't make any difference to the way your eye treats it.

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When you get right down to it, a rainbow isn't located at a specific place in space — it's located in the space behind your eyes, in that lump of tissue called your brain.

LOOKING FOR RAINBOWS

If you spend much time looking for rainbows, you'll notice that you can only see a rainbow under certain conditions — when the sun is at your back, shining on water drops that are in front of you. You might find that rainbows are more likely when the sun is low in the sky — in the early morning or late afternoon.

You get a rainbow when light shines into a water drop (bending on its way in), then bounces off the back of the drop (bending again on its way out). If you're going to see a rainbow, your eyes have to be in a position to intercept that reflected light. When the sun is low in the western sky, sunlight shining on a storm to the east of you makes a rainbow you can see for miles. At the same time of day, you won't see a rainbow in a thunderstorm to the west of you. That doesn't mean that the raindrops in the western storm aren't making a rainbow. Though you aren't in the right position to intercept the rainbow light, an observer standing on the other side of the storm might be.

The rainbow from that distant thunderstorm can arc across a city. A rainbow in your lawn sprinkler can easily fit in your yard. But Paul says these two rainbows are the same size.

If you think in terms of angles, Paul's right. Suppose you drew a line from your head to the center of the circle of which the rainbow arc is a section. Then you drew another line from your head to the red band in the rainbow. The angle between those two lines is always 42 degrees, whether the rainbow spans a city or just a few feet. You can use your hands to measure that angle and find a rainbow. (See page 108.)

Each of the rainbow colors bounces away from a raindrop at a slightly different angle relative to the path of the incoming light. You can think of a falling water drop as more or less spherical. (Forget the cute little tadpole-shaped drops that cartoonists draw.) Red light bends and reflects so that it leaves that spherical water drop at an angle of 42 degrees or less. Green light bounces away at an angle of 41 degrees or less. Blue light reflects at 40 degrees or less. Because the falling water drop is spherical, each color of reflecting light forms a cone,

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with the drop at the tip. These cones of colored light nest, one inside the other, with red on the outside and violet on the inside.

The angles at which each color bounces away from the drop dictates the order of the colors in the rainbow. Starting from the outside of the primary bow, the colors are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. (The name Roy G. Biv is a mnemonic device that can help you remember the order of the rainbow colors. Each letter of the name gives you the first letter of a rainbow color, in order.) Isaac Newton identified seven colors in the rainbow, but that number is rather arbitrary since the colors are continuous, with one blending into the next. Newton chose to name seven colors because that matched the number of notes in the musical scale and satisfied his sense of order.

It takes a lot of water drops to reflect the colored light that makes the curve of the rainbow. If a line from your eye to a water drop makes a 42-degree angle relative to the path of the incoming sunlight, that drop will reflect red light to your eye. If the angle is 40 degrees, that drop will reflect blue light. The rainbow you see is made of red light reflecting from one set of drops, blue light reflecting from another set of drops, and so on. When you and your friend point at the top of the rainbow's arc, your friend is pointing to the rainbow made by one set of drops, the ones that his or her eyes are in the right position to intercept. The rainbow you see is reflecting from a different set of drops.

MORE COLORFUL OBSERVATIONS

If you're a careful observer of rainbows, you may have noticed that the sky is always brighter inside the rainbow's arc and darker outside. Some of the red light that's refracted and reflected by the raindrop ends up in the center of the arc. So does some of the orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet light. All these colors combine to make white light, making the area inside the arc brighter than the sky outside the arc.

Next time you see a rainbow, look for the secondary rainbow. In the secondary rainbow, the order of the colors is reversed, with red on the inside of the arc and violet on the outside. The red of the primary rainbow faces the red of the secondary rainbow. The light that makes the primary rainbow enters the raindrop and bounces once before it

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gets to your eye. The dim secondary rainbow is made by light that reflects twice before it leaves the water drop. The dark gap between the two bright bows is called Alexander's dark band, named for the Greek sage Alexander of Aphrodisias who described it back in 200 AD. This area is dark because none of the light reflecting from the drop ends up in this area. (If you can't find the secondary rainbow, try the trick on page 108.)

The intensity of the rainbow's colors can change with the light. Near sunset, the rainbow will be much redder, since blue and green light have been scattered as sunlight passed through the atmosphere.

The brightness of the colors in a rainbow also tells you something about the size of the water drops that produced it. Large raindrops produce a brilliant rainbow with bands of vivid colors. Smaller raindrops produce a rainbow with bands of color that merge, making colors that aren't as pure. In rainbows produced by tiny drops of mist, the colors overlap to make almost colorless arcs of brightness.

You're probably used to seeing rainbows produced by sunlight. But moonlight, which is just sunlight that has reflected off the moon, can make rainbows too. For *The Color of Nature*, a book we wrote recently on natural colors, we asked nature photographer William Neill to photograph the lunar rainbow at Yosemite Falls, instructing him where to stand on the night of the full moon and how long an exposure to take. The human eye can see the bright arc of a rainbow produced by moonlight, but the light is too dim for the color-sensitive cones of your eyes to register the colors. Sunlight is, after all, nearly a million times brighter than moonlight. With a time exposure of about two minutes, William Neill's photo reveals the colors that you can't see in the lunar rainbow.

OTHER COLORFUL SIGHTS

While you're watching the skies for rainbows, you may catch a glimpse of a halo, a ring of light around the sun or the moon. Halos are not as colorful as rainbows, but they may be pale red on the inner edge and pale blue on the outer edge.

Halos are common over North America, appearing dozens of times a year. But since most people are (quite wisely) not in the habit of looking at the sun, they miss seeing these common celestial phenomena.

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People are more likely to notice a halo around the moon.

Halos form when sunlight (either from the sun or reflecting off the moon) shines through ice crystals, usually ones that are high in the earth's atmosphere. If you hold a prism in the sunlight, light bends through it and separates into its component colors. If you rotate the prism, you'll find that the light shining through the prism is brightest at one particular angle, which will depend on the geometry of your prism. The ice crystals that produce halos are hexagonal, shaped sort of like unsharpened pencils with no erasers. The angle that produces the brightest light is about 22 degrees, and the most common halos are 22 degrees from the sun, with the sun at their center. If you cover the sun with your thumb and spread your fingers, your little finger will just touch a 22-degree halo.

When the sun is low in the sky, ice crystals in the atmosphere can create sundogs or parhelia, bright, colorful spots of light that follow the sun as it rises or sets. Sun dogs are sometimes mistaken for UFOs, since each spot of light has a reddish end and a bright whitish/blue end. Sometimes, sun dogs will have stubby "wings" made of a piece of a halo going through the sun dog.

Haloes form when the crystals are randomly arranged. Sundogs form when the diameter of the ice crystals is greater than their length, making hexagonal plates, rather than hexagonal pencils. These ice crystal plates fall flat through the air. Because the ice crystals are all oriented in one direction, they concentrate the light that could have made a halo into two bright spots of light — the sundogs.

All these colors come from refraction or the bending of light as it passes from one clear material to another. Perhaps the most elusive of all the refractory phenomena is the green flash or the green ray. Jules Verne describes the green flash in his 1882 story, "Le Rayon vert" ("The Green Ray"), in which a young girl refuses to marry the man her uncles have selected for her until she sees this celestial phenomenon.

According to some legends, seeing the green flash is an indication of true love. According to physicists, seeing the green flash is an indication of the proper atmospheric conditions — a cloudless sky and a view of the sun setting over a distant and unobstructed horizon. Under the right conditions (you choose: love or physics), the last ray of light from the setting sun is a

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brilliant green, rather than the crimson you might expect.

Sunlight refracts as it passes through the Earth's atmosphere, moving from the thin outer layers of the atmosphere to the denser atmosphere near the planet's surface. Because the atmosphere bends sunlight, it acts like a prism, dividing the white circle of the sun into solar images of all the colors of the rainbow. The setting sun is so bright that you can't distinguish these overlapping images. But when the sun is low enough in the sky, the horizon blocks out most of the sun and lets you catch a glimpse of the uppermost image. Since the atmosphere removes much of the blue, indigo, and violet light, the uppermost image is green and that's the last image you see.

WATCHING THE SKIES OVER MARS

Paul Doherty has been admiring celestial refraction in the skies of Earth for many years now — but he hasn't limited his observations to the skies of Earth. Back in 1977, when the Viking landers were photographing the surface of Mars, he realized that some of those photos might show haloes that were visible from the Martian surface. There are, after all, high thin ice clouds in the Martian atmosphere, perfect for the formations of haloes.

To calculate the radius of a Martian halo, Paul needed to know the index of refraction and shape of the ice crystals in those clouds. In other words, he needed to know the composition and shape of Martian snowflakes.

With the help of a colleague, a vacuum chamber, a vacuum pump, some carbon dioxide gas, and some liquid nitrogen, he created Martian conditions in his lab and grew some Martian snowflakes made of frozen carbon dioxide, or dry ice. After all, the atmosphere of Mars is mostly carbon dioxide and the high, thin, ice clouds on Mars form at below the freezing point of carbon dioxide under Martian conditions. The crystals Paul got were cube-octahedrons, cubes with their corners cut off. Knowing the shape of Martian snowflakes, he calculated that halos on Mars should appear at an angular radii near 26 and 38 degrees from the sun.

So far, none of the photos of the Martian surface have included such halos, but with the recent Pathfinder expedition, Paul is once again hopeful.

Watch the skies — and let the robots on Mars watch the skies too.

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To Do and Notice: Hands-On Rainbows

If there's sunlight on water drops, there's a rainbow somewhere. You just need to position yourself so that your eyes can intercept the rainbow that's reflecting from the drops. Here's a trick that will help you position yourself to find a rainbow just about anywhere. (The other morning, Pat used this trick to find a rainbow produced by a sunbeam shining into her shower.)

To find a rainbow, stand near the spray with your back to the sun. Find your shadow. It should be between you and the spray. If it isn't, move around until it is.

Hold both hands in front of you, with your arms straight. Spread your hands wide with the thumbs touching, tip to tip. Now place the tip of one little finger so that its shadow (if you could see it) would fall in the center of the shadow of your head.

Keeping that little finger in place, look at the sunlit drops that line up with your other little finger. You should see a rainbow right there.

Your two hands, spread in this way, measure out an angle of about 40°. Since the rainbow will always be at an angle of 42° away from a line between your head and the shadow of your head, this trick lets you find the rainbow angle and find the rainbow.

If you've found a rainbow and you want to find the fainter, secondary rainbow, it may help to know that the secondary rainbow is separated from the primary rainbow by a distance of about 9 degrees. If you hold a hand at arm's length and make a fist, the width of your fist is about 10 degrees. Look for the secondary rainbow just one fist-width away from the primary rainbow.

To Do and Notice: Polarized Rainbows

If you have a polarizing filter (maybe a lens from a pair of polarizing sunglasses?), try looking through the polarizer at the rainbow. If you turn the polarizing filter, you can extinguish a section of the rainbow. But you'll find that different sections of the rainbow are extinguished by different orientations of the filter.

That's because whenever light reflects or refracts at a non-vertical

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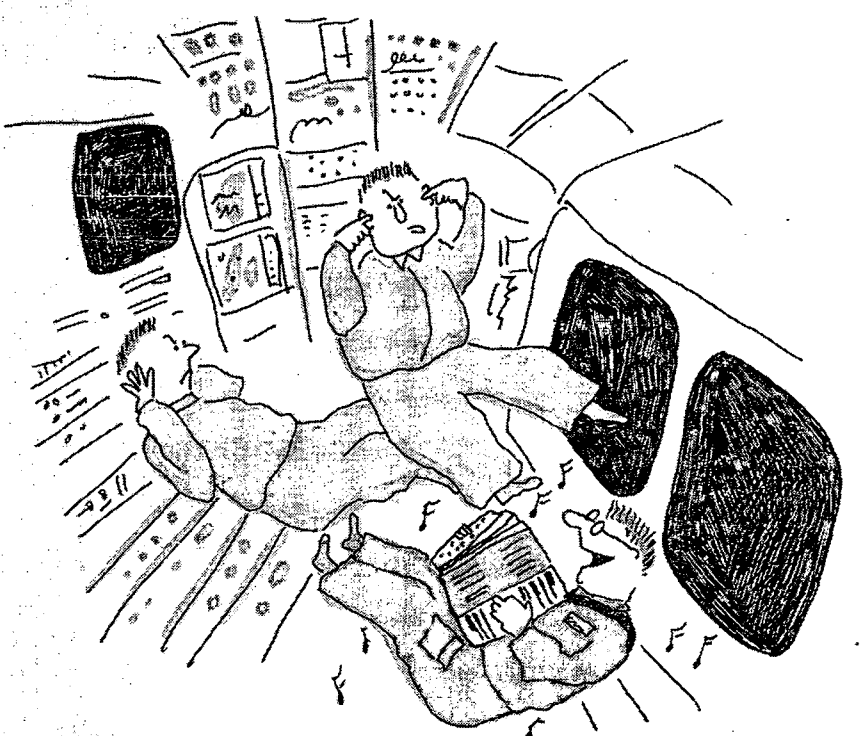
angle from an interface between two clear materials, it becomes polarized. The light reflecting from the water drops is polarized and the plane of polarization is always tangent to the rainbow's arc.

When light reflects from water, it's polarized parallel to the water's surface. That's why polarized sunglasses block the glare off water and let you see past the surface reflection to light that's coming from beneath the water.



No one thought space crews could mutiny.
Then came the accordion medley.

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Stephen Dedman's first novel, The Art of Arrow Cutting, *has just been published to good reviews. That novel blends fantasy and thriller genres, but in the following story Mr. Dedman gives us straightforward SF. "I wanted to write about* sane *scientists," he writes us from his native Australia. "I've only ever met one mad scientist—an entomologist with an enthusiasm for Madagascar cockroaches—and even he may have been merely eccentric."*

Mad? Sane? Who can say what's in the box?

Schrödinger's Catalyst

By Stephen Dedman

CAT, n. [(*C*]lear-(*A*]ir (*T*]urbulence.] *Avi.* The turbulence encountered in cloudless air as differentiated from storm turbulence...

catabasis, n. pl *catabases.* A going down or back...

catamnensis, n. pl *catamneses.* Med. A patient's medical history taken during, or after recovery from, an illness.

I GLANCED OUT THE WINDOW while I waited for the elevator. It must have been at least ninety outside already, and even the insects looked exhausted, but the clouds were there, as always; big, fat, lumpy cumuli, randomly scattered through the bone-dry air. We'd spent much of the night before watching the lightning, betting on how it would fork and expecting it to rain. It hadn't. Chalk up another victory for Chaos Theory.

I passed up the hotel breakfast in favor of coffee in the Green Room. DefDep was picking up my tab, but good, freshly brewed coffee always tastes vaguely wrong to me. Szymczyk, Schwartz, and Fukushima were

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still sitting around the table in the corner, arguing about turbulence and weather control and butterfly effects, as they had been at the last two conferences; Fuku paused long enough to grunt a greeting. The coffee was bitter and corrosive and exactly what I needed. I poured a little cream into it, watching it swirl and break up into fractal patterns. When I looked up, Cassidy was sitting at the table nearby, wearing a garish NASA T-shirt. With her dress sense and those breasts, it's no wonder she can't get tenure.

"Isn't it a little early for you?" I murmured, politely.

"I'm looking forward to your paper," she replied, opening a can of something that looked horribly healthy. I shrugged. I wasn't due to deliver my paper until tomorrow, but it may have been a non sequitur. I finished my coffee, glanced at my watch — 9:37 — and reached into my briefcase for my copy of the program. It wasn't there. I yawned, and walked over to the conference center. The traffic was heavier than I'd expected, this late on a Friday, even for a town where the malls don't open until ten.

I wandered around the halls, reading the program outside each room. It was all obvious stuff, and most of the names were unfamiliar. All of the *really* good work being done in the field is still classified. I stepped back and leaned against a pillar, reaching into my jacket pocket for my notebook and the list of possibles. I was still fumbling with the index (computers are for kids and passwords doubly so) when a fortyish woman in a maroon uniform passed in front of me, removing the program cards and replacing them with new ones. Curious, I wandered back and looked again. Fool woman had put Saturday's program up a day early. I caught up with her, and told her so, and she glanced at me, early morning irritation on her broad brown face. "This *is* Saturday..." she said, patiently, as though talking to a child, and then added, "Doctor."

I stood there, refusing to believe I could have misplaced a day. Physicists have a reputation for absent-mindedness and eccentricity, true; Feigenbaum spent a long time experimenting with twenty-six hour days, and Einstein often forgot his own address, but I can't claim the excuse of genius; I'm a lecturer and administrator, I have classes and meetings and deadlines every other day.

I glanced at the notebook again, and punched up the chronograph function, a little hesitantly. Saturday, August 5th. My watch confirmed it. I sagged against the pillar, and tried to think.

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"Morning, Peter," came an annoyingly cheerful voice from a few feet away. "Head-hunting again?"

I looked up. My confusion must have shown on my face, and stimulated Cortese's minuscule compassion circuit. "Something wrong?" he asked, softly.

I straightened my shoulders as best I could. How much *could* be wrong, after all? I hadn't had any commitments on Friday — a few papers I would have liked to have heard, but I had the abstracts. I could remember Thursday pretty well, and I'd *known* it was Thursday. I'd attended the opening address, all the telltales of Thursdayness had been apparent. "I'm okay," I replied. "A little jet-lag, maybe. I should be used to it, by now."

The Jesuit bastard snorted. "Not a hangover?"

"Did I get drunk last night?" I asked, before I could stop myself. Cortese shrugged.

"How would I know? The Bomb and Novelty Shop doesn't try to ply *me* with flaming Lamborghinis, or B-52s, or Wargasms, or whatever they call 'em. You sure you're okay?"

I nodded, and stood. I was shaky, sure, but my mouth is usually the first to tell me when I've downed too many cocktails, and it said I hadn't. "I'm fine," I said, almost believing it.

The maid had tidied my room by the time I returned. My program book was sitting on the bed, and I grabbed it on my way to the bathroom, and sat on the bidet by mistake. I wasn't accustomed to this sort of opulence; there was even a small TV monitor on the marble bench near the handbasin. It was a far cry from the bathroom at my parents' home, or the even worse one at the rooming house I'd stayed in as an undergraduate, or the graffiti-splattered ablutions block at the summer camp where I'd worked as a counselor.... I looked at myself in the mirror, cautiously. I've never been good looking, but I knew how to wear a suit and knot a necktie better than ninety percent of physicists.

I hated these conferences, hated leaving my familiar labs and lecture theaters and offices, even if there *was* a TV in the bathroom and someone to make my bed for me. I looked at Friday's abstracts. I hadn't made any notes, nothing that would remind me of where I'd been. I swore, stood, flushed the toilet, and zipped my trousers up. I opened a drawer to find a

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new tie, and saw the gun. For a moment, I thought — hoped — that I'd walked into the wrong room, but that was so improbable that I rejected it immediately.

I stared at the gun — a smallish revolver with a short barrel and rubber grip. It didn't look familiar; my father had owned a shotgun, and taught me to use it, I'm not a pacifist like Cortese or Cassidy, but I'd never handled a pistol before. Never felt the need. I broke it, and emptied the cylinder into my palm. Four bullets, and one spent cartridge.

Why the hell would I have bought a pistol? Pistols are only good for killing people, and I couldn't think of anybody I wanted to kill...well, nobody in Florida, anyway.

I sniffed the muzzle. It smelt clean, well-kept, and it hadn't been used in the past few hours. I sat there for a moment, wondering what the hell to do next, and then I dropped the offending item on the bed and collected a paper bag from the bathroom, a handkerchief from the drawer, and the stapler from my briefcase. I wiped gun and bullets clean of fingerprints, and then dumped them into the bag, which I stapled shut. The bag went into my suitcase, and I made a mental note to throw the whole mess into a lake before I had to fly out.

I DELIVERED MY PAPER with as much enthusiasm as I could muster, hoping that nobody would ask any questions I couldn't field. Nobody did; maybe nobody was sufficiently interested. I caught up with Cassidy in the corridor outside. "Lunch?" I panted.

She looked startled.

"Are you free for lunch?" I repeated. "On me?"

The startled look faded into mild suspicion. Finally, she nodded. "There's a sushi bar up International Drive. You have a car?"

"Yes — over at the Peabody."

"Okay."

There was still some uncertainty there. "Did you have other plans?"

"No, I'm just — a little taken aback. Are you okay?"

I shrugged. "A little stressed, I guess. That, and jet lag. Nothing serious."

"When was the last time you had a vacation?"

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"I hate vacations," I replied, automatically. Actually, that was true. Half of my colleagues had taken at least one day off to visit Disney World or one of the other playgrounds; I hadn't even found the way to the hotel swimming pool.

Cassidy shook her head, tut-tutting like my Jewish grandmother. "When did you come to *that* conclusion? What do you do in the summer?"

"Work." I tried to keep it light. "DepDef doesn't believe in holidays. Eternal vigilance is the price we, etc., etc."

"Christmas?"

I grimaced. "I go and see my family. Sometimes."

"When you can't avoid it?" she asked, gently.

"We don't get on that well," I explained. "They're still living in the town where I grew up, and I hate the place." I blinked. I couldn't remember ever telling anybody that before, and I felt as though I'd given away classified information.

"Any hobbies?"

"Uh...I like flying, especially gliders, but I haven't done that in — " I had to think about it, "two years. Maybe three."

"What did you enjoy as a kid?"

I shrugged. "Nothing. I hated it; couldn't *wait* to grow up."

"I suppose you hate sushi, too?"

"I've never tried it," I admitted.

She smiled. "Let's go."

I switched the radio on as soon as we were in the car, to try to postpone any further conversation, and caught the local news headlines, and that's how I heard about the murder.

"Friend of yours?" Cassidy asked, softly.

"What?" I jumped, and nearly steered the TransAm into the side of an old Lumina. The driver flipped me the finger; her red nails were over an inch long, and viciously curved.

"The Father...the victim. Did you know him?"

It was only a few blocks to the restaurant; if it weren't for the heat, we'd have been better off walking. "I don't know. The name rings a bell, vaguely..." Cassidy laughed, and tried — unsuccessfully — to disguise it as a cough. "What's funny?"

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"Sorry. 'Rings a bell,' and him being a priest...I shouldn't have laughed."

The restaurant was visible now. "I knew a Father York, yes," I said, as I parked the car. "He was our parish priest, when I was a boy. I never knew his first name. I suppose it *could* be the same man..." I let go the wheel, trying not to let my hands shake. I told myself not to jump to conclusions, that I didn't have enough data; that there *was* such a thing as coincidence, that a hunch or a feeling wasn't proof...it didn't work very well.

"Who'd want to murder a priest?" Cassidy asked, innocently.

Instead of answering, I opened the door and stepped out into the Florida sunlight. I ducked around the car to open Cassidy's door for her, but she was quicker. "Something is wrong, isn't it?"

"No, of course not."

She slammed the door and swore at me. "Peter, if you think I'm going to sit opposite you for an hour and try to guess what is going on inside you like you were some sort of Schrödinger's bloody cat, and waste a perfectly good sashimi platter into the bargain — " She ran out of breath before she ran out of fury, and spluttered at me for a few seconds before remembering to inhale. "I gave you the benefit of the doubt; you've never tried to recruit me before, so I assumed it wasn't *that*, and I didn't think you'd waste your time trying to seduce me; you could do a lot better. Okay. You want to talk? Then *talk*!"

I had to laugh. Cassidy is barely five feet tall, and very stocky, with short curly hair; she looked for all the world like Samwise the hobbit (Jesus, how long was it since I read that book? Thirty years?). A second later, she joined in the laughter. When we'd finished, she leaned back against the TransAm and snapped, "Well?"

"Do you remember seeing me yesterday?"

She stared at me. "What?"

"I'm serious. It's important. I really can't remember."

She blinked, and then shrugged. "I remember better on a full stomach. You look like you'd better eat something, too. Come on. *My* treat."

I couldn't bring myself to eat raw fish, so Cassidy assured me that the katsudon was safe. To my relief, we didn't have to remove our shoes, or

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use chopsticks, and we were escorted to a paper-walled booth that reminded me of a confessional. "You weren't in the green room yesterday morning," Cassidy mused, after the waitress brought us cups of yellow, salty tea. "I missed most of the papers — Morgan and I went to the Space Center until four or five — and I don't remember seeing you in the evening, but that doesn't mean much."

"Thanks."

She looked at me over the rim of her soup bowl, and obviously decided not to ask me the next question.

"Any progress with the frequency doubling?" I asked.

The look became wary. Cassidy knows that DefDep is very interested in her work on blue lasers (she's interested in the micro-surgical applications; they want EMP-proof computers), and she rightly suspects they'd pay a lot to have it classified. "No. Why?"

"Just curious."

"You don't expect us to succeed, do you?"

I tried to spear one of the white soft cubes in my soup, and decided it wasn't worth the effort. "You're working with very limited resources," I evaded. Cassidy's a much better physicist than I am, but the days when you could make even a minor breakthrough in physics with less than a million dollars are long gone; the cold fusion debacle proved that. "I wish you luck, of course."

"At least we're not trying anything physically impossible."

"S.D.I. wasn't *impossible*." Okay, so some of our satellites have to be repaired and re-deployed, some of our rockets still blow up on the launch pad, none of the nukes we've launched accidentally have ever detonated, and we bombed the French Embassy in Libya and our British allies in Kuwait; I'm sure that we *could* have made the system work, if we'd had unlimited resources and maybe a couple of centuries, and who was I to say it wouldn't have been worth the effort? "Besides, it did for lasers what World War II did for avionics; without it, this conference wouldn't be happening..."

"Does that justify it?"

I shrugged. What would the money have been spent on otherwise? Stealth bombers that didn't fly? Cruise missiles that did? Not on

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hospitals, or medical research, or controlled fusion, or the civilian space program. Of *that*, I was sure.

I told the hotel manager that I'd lost a 3" floppy of valuable (but not classified) data; I didn't accuse anybody of having taken it, of course, but I told him that I wanted to know which maid had cleaned my room on Friday, and when, in case she'd seen it. He told me. She'd cleaned the room between 10:10 and 10:35, and I hadn't been there.

I sat in the room for a while, staring at the bag with the gun inside, wondering where the hell it could have come from. How easy was it to buy a handgun in Florida? Was there a waiting period? I'd seen the 'No Firearms Permitted' signs in the parks and outside the cinemas...

Eventually, I tore the bag open and had a closer look at the gun. The bullets were .38 Special; there were probably half a million guns firing the same caliber in the state, and if York had been shot with anything else, I was in the clear. Unfortunately, I didn't know any safe way of finding out; my security clearance didn't extend to routine forensics, somebody would want to know why I wanted to know. I stared at the gun for another moment, my hands shaking, and then carefully wiped it clean again and took another bag from the bathroom.

After all, I told myself, I couldn't have been the only one with a motive. It'd been more than thirty years, nobody had believed me at the time; even if I'd been the first, there must have been others later...

I lay down on the bed, and tried to think. My last memory of Thursday night — actually Friday morning — was the General Dynamics cocktail party. I'd been arguing with a couple of Oxonians about the English 'friendly fire' casualties in the Gulf, and Lippincott had rescued me; I'd left just after two, and come straight to bed. Then...Saturday morning. Okay. And York, according to the local papers, had been shot sometime *Thursday* afternoon. That should have meant I was in the clear, and there was no need to get into a flap, but...

Okay, I thought. I don't remember Friday, but I do remember Thursday. I don't remember seeing York — hell, I didn't even know he was living in Florida, though I could've guessed he'd retired if I'd bothered thinking about it. I certainly don't remember buying a gun...I stared at the bag. I might never know whether I'd bought it or not, unless I'd used my Visa

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card, and I wouldn't have done that if I'd been planning to kill somebody...

Or it might have been York's gun. I might have found it there. But why would I visit Father York? I stared at the bag again, and knew there was only one reason.

But I *couldn't* have visited York. Okay, forgetting maybe twenty-four hours, I could accept. Not being seen by anybody in that time...not impossible, and it still didn't meant I'd disappeared completely...

But disappearing Friday, and being in two places at once on Thursday...for Christ's sake, that was time travel! Nobody believes in time travel, not even chaos theorists or science fiction writers. And even if it was possible, it'd take enormous amounts of energy, billions of dollars of equipment, not just one third-rate laser man wanting to kill the man who'd abused him as a boy —

But I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd done it, that I'd killed the bastard. I didn't *know* it, the way I know my name or the speed of light in a vacuum, and I was sure no one could *prove* it, and I didn't feel *guilty*, but...

I sat there shaking for what felt like hours, then stapled the bag shut, dropped it into my briefcase, removed my name badge, and walked out.

FINDING A LAKE was easy (Orlando is reclaimed swampland); finding a Catholic church more difficult. I guess I should've tried the phonebook before I left the hotel. The place I finally found was small and shabby, a concrete blockhouse with an unpaved car-park, barely distinguishable from the topless bar across the road. Inside, it was dark, and almost miraculously cool.

The confessional was empty, and I sat down and pulled the curtain shut, sealing myself inside like Schrödinger's cat. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned," I mumbled. "It has been..." Oh, Jesus, "uh, thirty years since my last confession." Silence. "Thirty-one," I said, after a quick calculation. "My sins are...

"I...

"I think I killed somebody."

There was a long silence, then a soft, vaguely feminine voice suggested, "Tell me about it."

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I stared at the screen. Granted, it'd been nearly thirty years since I'd set foot in a church, but I knew there weren't any female Catholic priests. "I'm sorry," I said. "I can barely hear you."

"Is this better?" The voice was louder, but no deeper. It sounded a little like my sister, a little more like Cassidy. Maybe it wasn't a female voice at all, just an accent. At least it was easier to listen to than York's Southside Chicago growl. "I think I killed a priest," I said. "A *Catholic* priest."

Another silence. "You're not sure?"

"I don't remember doing it," I replied. There seemed no point in adding that I was somewhere else at the time.

"Then why do you think you killed someone?"

"That's not all I don't remember," I said, glumly. "I don't remember buying a gun, either — but there was a gun in my room this morning. I don't remember shooting him, or even seeing him, but *somebody* shot him — "

"Why do you think it was you?"

"Because I had a motive."

"Were you the only one?"

"I don't know."

"Could there have been two other people who wanted to kill him?"

"Yes, maybe."

"More than two?"

"I don't know."

"Five more? Seven? Nine?"

I hated the idea, but it was certainly possible. "Maybe."

"Maybe more?"

"I don't know!"

"And they could have done it?"

"Yes, I guess so..."

"So," said the voice. "There's maybe a one-in-ten chance that you killed somebody. Maybe one in twenty, maybe one in a hundred."

I sat there, and digested that. How did you calculate the probability of time travel? Wasn't it much more likely that someone else had shot him? "Yes," I said. "I guess that's right. Maybe even less than that."

"What do you do for a living, my son?"

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I started: what the hell did that have to do with anything? "What?"

"What's your job? What do you *do*?"

"I'm a scientist," I said. "A physicist. Why?"

"What *do* you do?"

"I'm an assistant professor." I said. "I lecture, take a few classes, do a little research, and write a third-rate paper every now and then. And I recruit better physicists for DefDep — Department of Defense — projects. I guess that's all."

"Have you done anything good?"

I thought about that. "I did some pretty good work on CAT — Clear Air Turbulence — back in the eighties. Nothing very deep, but it was non-classified, and well received; it's still being cited occasionally, mostly by chaos theorists, and I guess it got me the DefDep job. Since then — " I shrugged.

"What's your speciality?"

"Laser guided weaponry," I replied before I had time to wonder whether or not I should.

"And the weapons you help build," said the voice, "have they been used?"

"Yes."

"They've killed people?"

"Yes...I mean..."

"How many people? Hundreds? Thousands?"

What the *hell*? "I don't know," I said, warily. "I've no data — no evidence. Maybe they've saved lives, too. We're making the weapons more accurate — okay, maybe that makes them more deadly, but we kill fewer civilians, fewer of our own people, I think that's a worthwhile goal —.

"I mean, back when Reagan wanted Libya bombed, 'precision bombing' meant that they hit the right city. Okay, they hit Gadaffi's home, but they also hit the French Embassy. Now, look at the Gulf War. 'Precision bombing' meant putting a missile into a bunker through the door or window." At least, I admitted silently, those were the ones we showed on TV.... "If I have to take my share — and it'd be a microscopic share — of the blame for anybody who died in those bunkers, okay, I'll take it. I mean, the weapons didn't *cause* the war, it still would've been fought without them..." Or would it? I wondered, silently. Would Iraq have invaded

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Kuwait if it hadn't had the weapons left over from the war with Iran? What would we have done if it hadn't looked like such an easy victory? Anyway, that was war, not murder, and it hadn't been my decision to...

"What about the 'friendly fire' casualties?"

I opened my mouth to speak again, and then closed it. "Accidents are inevitable," I said. "Especially if you can't actually see your target, and have to rely on circumstantial evidence to know if you've hit somebody.... At least it wasn't men fragging their officers, the way it was in Vietnam..."

"*Are* they inevitable? Even with more accurate weapons?"

"Hell, yes! Even if you can pick out a target with a laser...it never works quite the way it would in a model. The air is never completely clear, or completely still, and you can't predict what it'll do to the beam, there's always butterfly effects, and the missile is much slower than the beam and even more prone to turbulence, to chaos....We're very close to the theoretical limits of accuracy already."

"Why do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Weapons work."

"It's my job. It's what I'm — " I stopped. "What I'm good at" wasn't particularly accurate, and "what I'm paid for" didn't seem adequate, not when I was being accused (*was* I being accused?) of murder. After all, it wasn't as though the weapons wouldn't still be built, and used, if I quit, or that I was going to make some great contribution to physics...

I was still hunting for the right words when the voice asked, "What's a butterfly effect?"

"Huh? It's...it's an idea from Chaos Theory. A statistically trivial event with significant repercussions. Like a butterfly flapping its wings in China changing wind patterns and causing a hurricane in Florida...but I think the name *really* comes from an old Ray Bradbury story. A time traveler treads on a butterfly in the Cretaceous and changes the future. 'A Sound of Thunder.'"

"One butterfly can make that much difference?"

I laughed. "Theoretically. It's a thought experiment, like Schrödinger's Cat. But if it's in the right place at the right time..." I remembered why I was here, and stopped laughing, very suddenly. There was silence on the other side of the grille. "Ah, Father..."

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Silence.

"Father?"

Still, silence.

"What's my penance?" I whispered, but there was only silence, and when I found the courage to open the booth and look inside, it was empty.

DefDep was less than delighted by my resignation, especially when I said I was going to be working on blue lasers with Cassidy. Maybe I should've told them I believed in time travel, that I knew it was possible if we had the resources and maybe a couple of centuries, and who was I to say it wouldn't have been worth the effort?; they would've been much happier to get rid of me. I'm sure they were far more upset when Fukushima resigned from the Weapons Division, only a month later. Maybe I've started something...

Cassidy's stopped asking about that Friday (or was it a Thursday) last August; after all, I've got days to spare, now. Sometimes I work at the lab. Sometimes I go flying. Sometimes I read history books, and marvel at how minor events or timely inventions have changed the world, and how narrowly catastrophes have been averted. But usually, I just sit on my balcony, and watch the butterflies blow the clouds around. ☙

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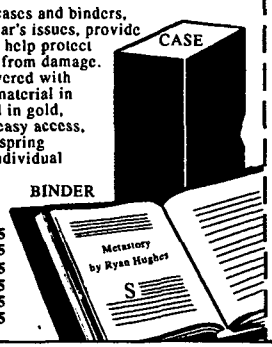

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It's traditional, of course, for us to publish a Christmas story around this time every year, but there's nothing traditional about the following fantasy. K. D. Wentworth remarks that this story grew out of the observation that "in the hands of some people, religion is as dangerous as a controlled substance." Ms. Wentworth lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and—as anyone who has read one of her novels knows, and as you'll soon see—has an imagination best termed "offbeat."

'Tis the Season

By K.D. Wentworth

IT WAS CHRISTMAS EVE and a nasty, strung-out feeling of anticipation filled the air like a cheap deodorizer. I was cruising down the expressway in my squad car, on my way back from disposing of an illegal manger scene erected at the river park. Man, I hate all that insincere, pious yap about "peace on earth, goodwill towards men." If you let those stupid carols suck you in, you might actually believe the young turks really want to make the world a better place, that is until a couple of rabid Episcopalians knock off a Catholic priest for muscling in on their territory, or some Baptists torch a pile of Unitarian hymnals because they don't have no crosses on the front. Then you understand — it's denomination eat denomination in this world, buddy, and every priest, shaman, minister, monk, pope, or whatever for themself.

I was keeping a sharp eye out for graffiti, you know — "Where will *you* spend eternity?" or "Buddha lives!" — that kind of crap, spray-painted on underpasses right where impressionable schoolchildren could see it.

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Working the God-beat, of course, I've seen it all, the pastor-snatchings, the so-called mere "moments of silence" some closet-Lutheran announcer tries to sneak in before a basketball game, the really nasty tricks that can be played on the unwary with a Bible verse.

I admit, like so many others, I dabbled in this stuff when I was too young and stupid to know any better. It all starts with a harmless flirtation, just a weak moment of wondering "what if it's all true?" Then your average Joe smuggles home a bit of holly, or a missal, maybe lights a candle in some illicit roadside prayer house, and takes that naive first step down the road to perdition. "I can stop anytime I want," they say. "I don't really believe all that stuff."

Yeah, right. Tell it to someone who hasn't cleaned up after a baptism gone bad, or seen the havoc twenty whacked-out fanatics can wreak after a really wild first communion. The boys in Washington can legislate against this stuff all they want, but we'll never be free of it until we stamp out that spineless, sick craving for "absolution" and "the other world."

The last rays of the setting sun were painting the highway a faint rose when I spotted a broken-down van with the metal outline of a stylized fish just above the back bumper. The short hairs crawled up the back of my neck. Them fish guys have been some of my worst busts.

As I passed the van, I noted several scantily clad young skirts peering forlornly under the raised hood, so I slowed down and called into headquarters. "I got a live one here, maroon Chevrolet van, license number Ida Harry William one five five. It has that fish-thing on the bumper and a bunch of boxes in the back under a tarp."

Static crackled. "Computer says it's clean," the dispatcher said after a moment. "But you watch your butt, Al. We've had sporadic reports of caroling north of Greenwood and most of the units in your area are tied up."

"Roger, will do." I clicked off with a sigh, then swung my unit across the median and switched on my flashers. The two skirts looked up and their faces broke into relieved smiles. Neither of them wore a coat, although the temperature had been steadily dropping all day. The younger of the two, a creamy-skinned brunette with legs that just wouldn't quit, raised her arms over her head and waved. "Over here, officer!"

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The air was damn cold as I crossed the median, one hand on my gun, just in case they wasn't the innocents they appeared to be. My breath turned to white fog and I started shivering. "What's the problem here, ladies?"

The brunette pouted. I noticed she had a dimple in her chin. She couldn't have been more than seventeen. "The engine died, I think. At least it won't go and we're not out of gas." She gestured at the raised hood. "Would you take a look? My dad's gonna kill me if I don't get home in time to do my algebra homework."

I pushed my hat back and fought to keep my teeth from chattering. "S-sure thing." I edged along the van as the traffic whizzed past inches away and eyed the boxes crammed into the back of the van. A bit of gold-fringed white fabric hung out of one. It looked familiar, I thought, kind of like a fancy tablecloth my mom used to have, or maybe — an altarcloth?

I kept my cool as I reached the front of the van. "Did you try — " I turned back just in time to see this mondo crucifix descend toward my skull. I ducked, but not fast enough, then a galaxy of lights, all different colors, exploded behind my eyes.

"You didn't hit him hard enough," a tinny female voice complained from far off, Africa maybe, or Mars. "He's still breathing."

"We want him to breathe, stupid," another female answered. "How else is Father Lennie gonna baptize him?"

Alarm seeped through my fogged head. I considered opening my eyes, but couldn't seem to find them. My mouth tasted like the weed-choked bottom of one of them government-protected wetlands.

"He could just give him last rites instead."

"What good would that do?" asked the second voice, which had a huskier, more contralto quality. "An altar boy is supposed to receive all seven sacraments. Well, at least six, I guess, if he's gonna get into Heaven. I guess he don't need to get married, if he takes holy orders."

Holy orders...I tried to protest, but only a groan succeeded in making it past my lips.

"See?" the second voice said triumphantly. "He's fine." A small hand tilted my chin from side to side and bright-red rockets exploded at the base of my skull. "Welcome back to the land of the living, altar boy."

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My eyelids popped open. I stared up through a crimson haze at a face surrounded with black over white, either a woman or the biggest damn penguin I ever saw. "Wha — ?"

The head nodded. "Midnight Mass is in ten minutes. You'd better look sharp, or Father Lennie'll have your ass. You'll be on your knees saying Hail Marys until half-past Easter!"

"Now, Sister Prudence," another female voice said, "don't scare this poor turd to death, not before he gets himself baptized, anyway." She giggled.

I struggled up to a sitting position, which was blamed hard. My hands was bound before me with a rosary looped tight enough to cut off the circulation and my holster was empty. Damned if they wasn't *nuns* — I should have known better. The fish icon was just a decoy to sucker me in. If I'd had any inkling I was dealing with the Pope's Crew, I would have hauled my piece out and called for backup, carolers or no carolers. These jokers have got a real deadly sense of organization.

They'd dumped me in a badly lit warehouse of some sort, crates piled up to the ceiling, and me, sitting there with my back propped against a forklift. The chill from the concrete floor had numbed my legs and I could still see my breath. There was a hint of communion wine in the air as I tugged at the rosary. The damned beads just bit deeper into my swelling wrists.

Sister Prudence patted me on the cheek, then dug a nail file out of a backpack and went to work on her black lacquer nails. Each one featured a different Station of the Cross, real hard-core stuff. I began to sweat in earnest.

She filed the edges delicately. "Now, all you gotta do is follow Father Lennie down the aisle and light the candles when he says. No big deal. You can do that much even with your hands tied."

I tried to remember all my training sessions for hostage negotiation, but my throbbing head felt like it had been stuffed with soggy communion wafers. "You ain't gonna get away with this," I said. "I radioed headquarters my twenty before I — "

"Your twenty?" the other nun asked. She reached up and tucked a bright pink lock of hair back under her starched black-and-white headdress.

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"My *location*." A muscle twitched under my right eye. "And I called in your tag number too. They oughta be here in about ten seconds."

"Oh, that!" Sister Prudence dimpled. "Sister Charity steals us a new tag every day."

Sister Charity, she of the pink hair, winked. "Hey, the Big Guy helps those who help themselves." She shook out a white circle of cloth with a hole cut in the middle. "Here, put your head through this."

I ducked back out of reach. "What is it?"

"It's your surplice, stupid," she said airily. "All altar boys wear them."

"I ain't no goddamned — "

"Well, what have we here, sisters?" a scratchy male voice on the leading edge of puberty inquired. "A sinner in need of redemption?"

"You betcha, Father," the two nuns said in unison. They thrust their hands inside their wide sleeves and inclined their heads to this pimple-faced dude dressed all in black, complete with a high black collar and the biggest crucifix I'd ever seen resting on his concave chest. He had to be all of fifteen.

Sister Prudence grimaced. "I knows he's pretty ancient, but — "

"Ancient?" Sister Charity rolled her heavily outlined blue eyes. "He's practically morgue-fodder!"

"But — !" Sister Prudence glared. " — those freaking Whittier Baptists from over on Archer Street ran Franky down with their hearse this afternoon. There's not hardly nothing left of him but a black and white smear in the center of the road." She gave me a smoldering look. "This joker's the best we could do on short notice."

"Poor Franky." The priest, for that was what he had to be, frowned. "May the Lord have big-time mercy on his soul." He zipped the sign of the cross in the air, then smiled wide enough I could see his braces, decorated with tiny crosses where the wires intersected. "Never mind, sisters. Our lost brother Franky has gone to a for-sure Better Place, and this poor bastard looks in sore need of redemption. We'd better do the baptism-thing before Midnight Mass rolls around."

They grabbed my arms and hauled me upright. My head began to throb again. The warehouse wavered and my stomach wasn't sure what action it wanted to take. I swallowed hard. "Now, wait just a goddamned

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minute." I jerked out of their hands and stood there wobbling on my own. "Kidnapping is a felony! You three turkeys are looking at ten to twenty — "

"Jeez, sounds like we're in serious need of a vow of silence." Father Lennie whipped out a smudged handkerchief.

I staggered backwards against the forklift, prepared to defend myself, but Sister Prudence slipped up behind and threw a choke hold on my neck that would have done credit to a professional wrestler. "There, there," she whispered into my ear as the warehouse spun and darkened, "it's for the good of your immortal soul. Someday, you'll thank..."

When I could see again, the handkerchief was balled and stuffed into my mouth and the white surplice had settled over my shoulders.

"Cool!" The pimply priest rubbed his hands together. "Now, where did I put that vial of holy water?"

Worshippers were filing in, parishioners, I guess they call themselves, hard-bitten regulars too, by the look of them. They all wore suits and hats and *ties*, even St. Christopher medals. I counted at least five more nuns and two priests among them, both of the latter younger than Father Lennie. They gave me a nervous glance, then seated themselves with an air of expectancy on crates lined up before the cloth-covered altar.

Father Lennie slapped first one set of pockets, then another, apparently finding them all empty. "Jeez, I hate it when my mom goes through my pockets!"

Sister Prudence whispered, "You wanna borrow mine?"

He scowled. "Like, how do I know it's the real stuff?"

She reached inside her robe and pulled out what seemed to be a bottle of Perrier. "Hey, I only buy from Harvey the Saint down on Boulder Avenue. He has visions and everything."

Despite the chill, a drop of sweat trickled down my temple as he held the bottle up to the light, then screwed the cap off and sniffed. I edged back toward the forklift, thinking maybe I'd find a sharp edge somewhere to cut the rosary beads, then hoof it out into the night and lose myself. I didn't want to wind up dead just because I couldn't muster the proper expression of religious ecstasy on my face.

More people streamed in from a door somewhere over on the left. I couldn't see it for the crates piled up almost to the ceiling. These new parishioners brushed past me and I noticed they was dressed differently,

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all in polyester warm-up suits of a white so bright, it half-blinded me, and carrying monster-sized Bibles under their arms.

"I guess this stuff is okay." Father Lennie motioned to me. "Come here, my son, and kneel."

I turned tail and fled.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Sister Charity tackled me from behind and brought me down, face-first, on the concrete floor.

I lay there, my nose scraped raw, the wind knocked out of me, trying with all my might to remember how to breathe. Father Lennie stood over me and poured a healthy dollop of "holy water" on my head. "I baptize thee in the name of — "

"That's far enough, padre!" a male voice boomed. "Put down the funny H_2O and nobody gets hurt."

Father Lennie turned on Sister Prudence. "I thought you two posted guards!"

"We did!" She looked green. "Six of 'em, not a day under twelve."

"Jeez, can't you nuns do anything right?" He set the bottle down next to my ear and backed away while "holy water" dripped off my nose onto the concrete. "N-now don't nobody get nervous," he quavered. "It's Christmas. You know — God rest ye merry gentlemen and all that crap."

A ruddy-faced guy, pushing sixty, if he was a day, kicked the holy water bottle aside, narrowly missing my ear. He was wearing one of those white warm-up suits and sporting an AK-47. "Hallelujah, brethren! Raise those lily-livered hands over your heads and back up against the wall." He gestured with the gun.

Rolling his eyes, Father Lennie did as he was told. The two nuns followed, hands raised and little pinkies elegantly crooked, real refined. The parishioners mumbled and milled about the packing-crate sanctuary.

"I'm Pastor Buck of the Fifteenth Street Methodists," ruddy-face said, "and I want to welcome you all to our service. Our sermon for today is 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.' Amen. We will now pass amongst the congregation and take up the Christmas offering." He winked at a silver-haired granny who flashed her dentures in a chilling barracuda smile, then hauled a bronze tray out from under her warm-up jacket and proceeded to shake down the newly formed congregation.

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I squirmed up into a sitting position, working at the rosary. The cord was just cheap string and I could feel it beginning to fray. Over at the impromptu offertory, one grizzled-looking fellow shook his head as the tray paused underneath his nose, so the granny flashed him a peek at the knife she was packing, which looked to be about right for disemboweling a whale. He flushed and surrendered his wallet.

"That's it, brothers and sisters!" Pastor Buck's fat face beamed. "The Lord loveth a cheerful giver. As the Good Book says, we must all give until it hurts."

The rosary cord parted and the damn beads clattered across the floor, calling his attention back to me. I jerked the gag loose and stumbled back onto my feet. "Thstop in the name of the law!" I lisped, my mouth dry as the Sahara.

"Death before excommunication!" cried Father Lennie, darting forward as the AK-47 wavered toward me. He snatched up the vial of holy water by the neck and smashed it against the nearest crate, transforming it into a jagged bottle top. The old granny with the offering plate squealed like a stuck pig and whipped out her knife. The congregation scattered like chickens fleeing a pack of rabid wolves.

Pastor Buck swung the AK-47 back and depressed the trigger. I hit the floor again, both arms over my head as the recoil from the first round sent him stumbling backwards onto the loose rosary beads. He went down like a poleaxed buffalo as bullets stitched neat holes across the ceiling.

My heart was pounding like a steam engine struggling up Pike's Peak. Common sense whispered that I should just let them shoot it out, then round up the survivors, but unfortunately my job description says "to serve and protect." I hitched across the concrete on my knees and forearms toward the nearest pile of crates, cursing all the way, wishing those idiots who keep lobbying for legalization of religion as a so-called "victimless crime" could see this mess.

Father Lennie and the nuns had mobilized their stunned parishioners into an army of sorts and were now duking it out with gray-headed Methodists in white warm-up suits. The latter were using their oversized Bibles as both shields and bludgeons to middling fair advantage, but Father Lennie and the sisters was laying them out right and left with rhinestone-encrusted crucifixes, obviously the better designed of the two weapon

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systems. Pastor Buck must have hit his head when he went down, because he was still sprawled on his back, out cold as a dead mackerel.

Just as I reached the dubious cover of the crates, another volley of bullets ripped across the far wall. The two opposing forces hesitated. I couldn't see the doorway, but heard a calm male voice say, "Now that I have your most excellent attention, can anyone here tell me *what is the sound of one hand clapping*?"

Shit! I pressed my back against the crates. Not a Zen Buddhist! Anything but that! They roamed the city alone, rather than in groups, but each one of them was as crazy as the proverbial bedbug.

The two rival gangs dropped their Bibles and crucifixes, then backed away, dragging their wounded along with them. I heard bare feet slap across the warehouse floor. "No answers? My, but you are a dull lot, aren't you?" the bemused voice commented. "I'll give you one more chance, before I speed you all on your way to Nirvana — *When the Many are reduced to the One, to what is the One reduced*?"

Despite of the gravity of the situation, Father Lennie snickered. "Peanut butter?"

The Zen Master strolled into view. He wore a saffron robe, dropped stylishly off one bare shoulder, and his shaved pate had been polished to the reflectiveness of fine marble. He shook his head gently with an expression of profound regret. "I am sorry to say that answer shows you to be a woeful waste of resources in this world of ever-diminishing supply." He sighted in on Father Lennie's head. "May you achieve a *much* higher state of enlightenment in your next incarnation."

Father Lennie hit the ground and rolled, his pimply face gone the same pasty-gray as the concrete. The Luger spat a line of bullets that chipped through the packing crates above his head. "*Act without thinking.*" The Zen Master smiled beatifically. "*Work without effort.*"

I heaved to my feet. "*W-what happens to the hole when the cheese is gone*?"

He turned in my direction and bowed, his blue gaze fixed upon my face. "Nice," he murmured as he straightened. "I thought no one here had the wit to spar with me." He cocked his shaved head so that the overhead lights danced across its surface. His eyes glittered with amusement. "Shall we say winner takes all?"

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I nodded tersely, though I doubted, despite my misspent youth, that I could actually take him in a Zen koan duel. It had been a real long time and I had done my best to forget all of that. If I didn't try though, we were all dead meat. I squared my shoulders. *"What is the color of the wind?"*

He smiled. *"What is your original face before your mother and father were born?"*

"Wh-what..." My mind went blank. My hands clutched vainly at empty air. *"What is..."*

Sensing blood, my opponent advanced upon me, triumph bright in the confident set of his face. *"Say one word with your mouth shut!"*

I fished in my memory for every day I'd ever spent on a street corner with my begging bowl, the feel of saffron silk on my naked skin, bare feet walking the icy pavement in the middle of the winter, all the long-buried sensations I thought I'd put away forever. *"Every exit is an entry somewhere else!"* Breathing heavily, I stood my ground.

Behind him, I saw the hostages creeping out the door in a steady stream. Another koan or two, and then I would be free to deal with this miscreant on my own.

For the first time, he was forced to fumble through his own repertoire and no longer looked quite so confident.

Over his shoulder, I saw Father Lennie and the nuns drag two of their fallen comrades out the open door. At least half the Methodists had already made their escape.

The Zen Master sucked in his breath with a pleased gasp. *"If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?"*

Solidly back in my court again. I winced and dredged my failing memory for yet another round. *"When the student — "* The loud clink of a dropped crucifix broke my train of thought. I began again, hoping to distract my opponent. *"When the student is — "*

The Zen Master's head turned just in time to see the last of the parishioners and Methodists scamper out of the warehouse. "Cheat!" he spat at me, then dashed outside and took aim.

I followed, seized his shoulder and spun him around to meet a solid right-hand punch to the nose. He wilted to the frozen ground and the Luger went clattering across the parking lot. A hundred yards away, Father

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Lennie boosted Sister Charity into the maroon van, then hesitated. "You know, I think you got yourself a real serious calling there. Are you sure you don't want to take holy orders?" He gave me a big thumbs-up sign, then clambered into the driver's seat and screeched away. There was no sign of the Methodists or my squad car.

I sagged back against the corrugated iron of the warehouse and closed my eyes. Man, I told myself, you're getting too old for this stuff. You gotta get a different assignment.

Returning inside, I tied-up my defeated opponent with strips of altar-cloth, then grabbed a handful of stale communion wafers to munch while I searched for a phone.

By the time I found my unit, it had been painted with all the verses of "Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem" and would be out of service at the Division repair shop until a new coat of paint dried, so Dispatch stuck me on milk runs with old Joe Fusco, who's close to retirement and only answers silent alarms these days. I sit in the passenger seat as we speed toward another electronic hiccup, or some old dame who can't punch in her password fast enough, and I can't get it out of my mind — "*What is the sound of one hand clapping*?"

A bead of cold sweat runs down my neck and my hands shake. I knot them together and go over all the stuff I learned down in Rehab after I came off the streets and turned in my begging bowl.

One day at a time, as they say. One day at a time.

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Richard Paul Russo is the author of Inner Eclipse, Subterranean Gallery, Carlucci's Edge, *and his new novel,* Carlucci's Heart, *has just been published. Wayne Wightman's most recent book is a collection,* Ganglion & Other Stories. *Neither have done much collaborative writing before, but they found that this surreal and cerebral tale went surprisingly smoothly. Their key to success, quips Mr. Wightman, is that "Richard is sincere, and I don't care."*

At least, we think he was joking.

The Idiot's Dream

By Wayne Wightman and Richard Paul Russo

TARRANT FOUND THE blind man in the back of the cave. Sitting against the rear sandstone wall, the man was naked, his milky-white eyes open and unblinking. His thick-lipped mouth hung open, and dirt-streaked saliva trailed from his chin to his soft thighs. At first Tarrant thought the man might be dead, but then he saw the slow, deep intake of breath — chest filling, nostrils quavering — then a few moments later a long, slow exhalation.

It was nearly a full minute before he took another breath.

Tarrant crouched in front of the blind man, gazing at him. The cave was small, in the lower foothills just outside Los Gatos; though Tarrant had often hiked through the area, he had never seen the cave before. Today he had taken a long lunch-break from the lab, had driven to the base of the hills as he often did, and had set off on one of his regular treks through the trees. A half hour into his hike he had come across the cave entrance, just to the side of a large boulder, where he was certain that before there had

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been only dirt and brush. The rainstorm the day before, Tarrant decided, must have opened the cave.

As he crouched in front of the motionless figure, Tarrant wondered how long the blind man had been sitting in this place. The ground under the soft flesh was packed hard and worn smooth, as though he might have been sitting there for weeks...or even longer. Tarrant leaned forward, inspecting the naked man, and a sudden chill traced over his face and arms — the blind man's long pale hair seemed to have rooted into the surface of the cave wall behind him.

How long *had* this man been here? How had he stayed alive? Had someone been caring for him, feeding him? Tarrant looked around at the loose dirt of the cave floor. There were only his own footprints.

Tarrant waved his hand back and forth in front of the man's eyes, but there was no response. "Hey," Tarrant said. "Hey!" Still no response. Was the man deaf as well? Or maybe asleep. Did blind people sleep with their eyes open?

He should do something, Tarrant thought. Bring the man back to town, to a hospital, or call an ambulance, something. Tarrant reached out and touched the blind man on the shoulder. The skin was cool, nearly cold, and unnaturally smooth. The man didn't move, didn't even flinch. Tarrant took a firm hold of the blind man's shoulder and gave him a brisk shake. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

The blind man cried out, arched his body, and the cave walls moaned as rubble shook loose and crumbled away, showering down on Tarrant and the blind man. Tarrant released the man and staggered back. The blind man twisted where he sat, head anchored to the wall by his hair, then vomited up a black chunky fluid. The ground shook, knocking Tarrant to the cave floor, cracks appeared in the cave walls, and the blind man jerked his head back and forth, making a choking sound.

Then, just as quickly as it had begun, everything calmed. The blind man went silent and settled back against the cave wall, motionless. The ground stopped shaking. Except for Tarrant's heart pounding in his ears, everything was quiet.

Tarrant remained on his hands and knees for a few moments, staring at the dead eyes of the naked blind man, then got to his feet and ran out of the cave.

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* * *

The large, black sphere — hovering high above him in its stasis field — trembled slightly, then shook once with an enormous jolt. The Regulator noted the movement (two circles flashing red on the wall console before him), then quickly fingered a keyboard, and brought the sphere back to relative stability.

He looked over the vast chamber, at the huge dark sphere above him, and confirmed with his own eyes that it continued to tremble, though only slightly, then turned back to the bank of displays and readouts and light columns on the wall. His breath was smoke in the cold air. Only his hands and head were visible outside the bulky, convoluted black pressure suit.

His attention shifted constantly between the sphere, the readouts and displays and light columns, and his suit monitor. Occasionally his fingers flicked across one of the keyboards, or brushed a strip of glowing squares. A droplet of ice formed on the tip of his nose.

The Regulator turned and gazed at the sphere, and wondered what had caused the instability of the system.

In a dark Berlin apartment, Ulrike Walter woke with a start. A sharp pain arced through her belly, but she thought it was a sound that had awakened her, not the pain. Somebody crying out?

Ulrike lay in bed, listening, but could hear only traffic sounds outside, loud and regular. She sat up. The lighted crucifix at the end of the bed cast flickering dark shadows across the room. When she had first received the crucifix in return for her donations to the International Ministries of the Heart, the shadows had frightened her, but she was familiar with them now and could easily pray herself back to sleep when she awakened.

The pain eased somewhat but continued to pulse through her. She lay with her eyes barely open, murmuring the secret IMH prayers she had received by mail.

In the middle of the Third Prayer of Repose, a loud thought broke into the middle of everything. *I must go to America.*

America? That was crazy. What made her think that? She resumed her prayers.

Go to America.

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Although it made her fear for her soul, she ceased praying for a moment. What about her job, she thought, and what about money? And how long in America? She didn't know anyone there. She had thought that someday she might make the trip, but certainly not now.

The knife-pain in her stomach flared up. She stifled a moan and began the Third Prayer again.

Go to America. And the pain gouged into her at every syllable.

Why was this? What was happening to her?

She knew she was a weak person, perhaps prone to hysteria, but the pain....

A pale globe seemed to form out of the ceiling over her head. She knew it was only some trick of her tired eyes and the shadows from the crucifix light. She prayed and the sphere made a noise like a sudden exhalation of breath. Her eyes opened wide, convinced the figment would now vanish, but it didn't.

It was a face protruding through the plaster of her ceiling, a thick-lipped moronic-looking face, and though the eyes were open, there was nothing in them.

Ulrike prayed rapidly, knowing that everything in her life was at the desire of Jesus, all things, the fall of every sparrow, and she prayed rapidly, not taking her eyes off the face, until something wet and slow and thick dropped onto her cheek, and she flinched and cried out.

It felt like every organ in her body was being attacked with thorns.

Go to America.

"Yes," Ulrike gasped, "yes, yes, I'll go, I'll go."

And as easily as that, the face and the pain were gone.

Ulrike murmured the First Prayer of Acceptance, over and over until morning, and then she packed a small bag and went to the airport where she joined the other haggard, sleepless travelers who filled up the seats near her, all waiting for the first available flight.

When Tarrant got back to the med lab, Muskie and Vang were cleaning up. The place was a mess — glassware broken, fluids spilled, electrical equipment down or sputtering smoke. Something had blown up, and over in the corner, brown liquid dripped from the ceiling.

Muskie was laughing, and waved as Tarrant crossed the room. "Man,

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you really missed something," Muskie said. "It put us back about three weeks on some stuff, but it was almost worth it to see Vang's expression when he pulled all his fried little cultures out of the incubator. You shoulda seen it. He looked like he'd lost his best friend. Knowing Vang, he probably did."

"What, an earthquake?" Tarrant asked, thinking of the ground shaking inside the cave.

"Nope. That would have made more sense. Nothing shook at all, exactly, but all hell broke loose. First thing that happened, the coffee pot exploded." He gestured at the dripping brown stains.

"A good thing," Vang grumbled from the back corner, where he had the cover up on one of the centrifuges. "Save us from pancreatic cancer."

Through the heavy glass partition that separated the pathology lab from Electrophysiology, Tarrant saw Pascali bent over one of his new digital 12-lead EKG units. Through the open glass door, Tarrant heard the old Italian cursing the machine.

"Pascali was speaking in tongues for twenty minutes," Muskie said.

Tarrant turned back to his colleagues, feeling like his announcement would be an anticlimax. "I found something a little strange during my walk today. Does the phone still work?"

"Forget the phone. Check the waiting room, straighten it out, all right?" Muskie said to him. "We don't want our subjects to come in here and get their bowels in an uproar."

"I found a guy in a cave, about a quarter of a mile from here. Blind, deaf, maybe, and — "

"Hobo," Vang said, dropping the remains of the coffee pot into a trash can and watching the pyrex disintegrate. "Big deal."

Tarrant could see Muskie and Vang had no interest in his find. Looking at the mess in the two labs, he could understand. He crossed the room and stuck his head into Pascali's lab.

"Hey. Pascali."

Pascali looked up, frowning. "What the hell do you want? The lab blows up and everybody wants something."

"I just want to borrow one of your portable 12-lead EKGs tomorrow at lunchtime. I've got something I need to check out."

"What, find out if your girlfriend's got a heart?"

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"Pascali..."

The old man nodded. "Sure, sure, if the damn thing still works. Just take care of it, all right?" Pascali turned back to his new EKG unit, cursed again, and kicked the table it sat on.

"Thanks, Pascali. I'll take care of it."

"Hey!" Muskie called. "Tarrant! The waiting room?"

Tarrant nodded. "All right, I'll see what I can do."

The Regulator paced slowly along the banks of displays and readouts. He had been unable to bring about complete stability, and the fluctuations continued — a number flashing, a light column circling erratically, a depression pulsing when it should have been glowing steadily. He moved along the wall and tapped at keyboards.

He had, hopefully, set in motion the processes which would return the sphere to complete stability, but he did not know how long that would take, and until then he had to prevent the deviation from worsening.

The Regulator stopped for a moment and glanced at the huge black sphere. It continued to tremble.

HALFWAY INTO the flight, the pilot announced good-naturedly that because of unforeseen factors they would be arriving in San Francisco two hours early. Ulrike's concentration had been numbed by exhaustion, and at first the announcement meant nothing to her.

Then it struck her that the flight was supposed to go to Los Angeles. She sat up for a moment, looked around to see if anyone else was surprised. Everyone in the plane, including the stewardesses, looked numbed and dull, the same as she felt.

The attendants would listlessly mumble to the passengers, probably asking them what they wanted to drink. The passengers would not respond, and something would be set before them and remain untouched until it was picked up and thrown away.

Ulrike tediously dug through her purse for her ticket — it was so much work. She was almost sure the ticket listed Los Angeles as the destination. When she found it, she took it out and flipped it open. The destination slot was blank. So was the rest of the ticket. The right half

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of the ticket had nothing at all on it — the print had faded away.

For a brief moment Ulrike was terrified, but then, just as quickly, she realized it all had to be a part of her Lord's plans. She breathed slowly and deeply several times, calming herself. Then, staring at the empty ticket, she silently began the Fourth Prayer of Contemplation of the Mysteries.

Tarrant entered the cave, breathing heavily from carrying all the equipment up the hillside — portable 12-lead, blood pressure cuff, phlebotomy tray. He stood just inside the cave, shoulders aching, and let his eyes adjust to the light.

The naked blind man was still there, motionless against the cave wall, eyes open, and saliva continued to string from his thick lips to his folded legs. Tarrant laid out all his equipment on the cave floor, and began setting things up.

Simple things first, Tarrant told himself. Blood pressure, run an EKG. Then...then try to stick him for a little blood.

Tarrant was careful and gentle as he wrapped the cuff around the blind man's left arm. He had a hell of a time picking up the man's pulse, mainly because it was so slow — like his respiration — down to about six or seven beats a minute. Once he felt it, he started pumping air into the cuff.

As the pressure increased, slight tremors moved through the blind man, then through the cave floor.

"What the hell...?"

Tarrant stopped pumping, placed the stethoscope, and twisted the air release valve. At that moment, the floor of the cave calmed. Tarrant waited a long time, hearing nothing, then finally the first tone came through. More waiting. Eventually he felt the second tone, but never did hear it. Jesus. Thirty-four over palp. The guy should be about dead. What was he, in hibernation?

He removed the cuff and set things up for the EKG. He placed half a dozen electrodes on the man's chest, struggling to get them to stick to the almost slimy skin, strapped bands around the man's wrists and ankles, then plugged everything into the 12-lead. Tarrant turned on the power and started the EKG, watching the tracing feed emerge from the unit.

He'd expected odd tracings because of the low pulse rate, but not as strange as he was now getting. All three lines in the AVR lead were

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completely straight, as if the electrodes weren't picking up anything at all. Even the lines in leads I-III were strange, with dozens of tiny jumps between peaks of the QRS complexes, as though the ventricles were fibrillating constantly between beats.

Tarrant let the EKG run for close to ten minutes, then shut everything down and packed it away, tucking the printouts into his coat pocket. He'd have Pascali take a look at them. *Something* was wrong with this person.

Now, though, came the difficult part. Blood.

Tarrant prepared a drawing syringe and several vacuum tubes, though he had a feeling he'd be lucky to get even one. The blind man trembled, his arm twitched, and he moaned softly when Tarrant tied the tourniquet on the left arm to bring up a vein. Tarrant felt like shouting at the man, yelling at him to knock it the hell off, he was trying to help him.

Another tremor ran through the floor of the cave.

A vein gradually appeared, fat and dark. Tarrant swabbed with alcohol, placed the needle point on the skin, braced himself, and drove the needle in.

The blind man howled and bucked, twisting violently, but Tarrant held tight and kept the needle in the vein. Dark blue fluid, almost black, flowed into the syringe as Tarrant pulled back the plunger. The ground convulsed, the blind man moaned and howled, yanking and twisting in Tarrant's grip. Dirt crumbled and fell from the cave roof.

Losing control, Tarrant released the tourniquet, jerked out the syringe and stumbled back, landing on his butt. The earth tremors and the blind man's own convulsions continued, and Tarrant was afraid to move.

Then, like the first time, the shaking abruptly ceased. The blind man became still, and the haze of dust slowly settled throughout the cave, except where it landed on the blind man. There, strangely, it danced and slid away, as if the dust and the skin carried opposing electrical charges.

Tarrant got to his feet, syringe still in his hand. He quickly pumped the blood into a vacuum tube, packed up everything, then with one last look at the blind man, hurried out of the cave.

The fluctuations were getting worse. Another massive jolt had hit the black sphere, and though he'd managed to soften the subsequent vibra-

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tion, the sphere continued to shake, and threatened to destabilize completely.

The Regulator moved more quickly now, from one danger point to another, keying corrections into the keyboards, running his fingers along strips of light, depressing glowing plates he could barely reach. Behind and far above him, the sphere trembled and shook.

The pilot announced that they were passing over New York City.

Ulrike sighed heavily, but otherwise did not react much. Several hours earlier, the plane had *left* New York City. She glanced out the window now and saw the Statue of Liberty waist deep in the harbor. She wondered for a moment if there would be enough fuel to keep flying all the way to San Francisco, but then assured herself that Jesus would provide. Ulrike looked back at the movie screen.

She thought they must be playing the third or fourth movie now — a comedy, as nearly as she could tell, about a man reincarnated as a dog, but it seemed strangely scrambled and the screen periodically broke into images of grotesque violence, cannibalism, and blood-drinking.

Abruptly and without explanation, the screen blanked and the stewardesses again began lethargically distributing drinks and food — the second full meal of the flight.

Like the other passengers, Ulrike observed passively, sat quietly, accepted what was given her, and waited only for her arrival in San Francisco. Or wherever.

Tarrant barely made it back to the lab. His car kept dying, and if it hadn't been downhill most of the way, he'd have had to walk back. All the new potholes, which hadn't been there on his way up, didn't help much either. As it was, he coasted into the tiny parking lot and just managed to get the car into one of the spaces.

When he entered the lab, Vang and Muskie were, as usual, bent over their work, Muskie staring through his microscope, counting blood cells, and Vang putting a few numbers at a time into his computer and then staring glumly at the screen.

"Listen," Tarrant said, putting the case on a stool and talking to their backs, "either this EKG's blown its little mechanical mind, or I've found

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someone who's got only part of a heart and the weirdest looking blood I've — "

"We've been discussing how to murder you," Muskie said, making a few more checks on his eosinophil column.

"What?"

"You know," Vang said, "planning your demise, separating your various pieces in a lethal manner."

"What are you guys talking about? I'm trying to tell you, I've found someone extraordinary, someone who's honest-to-god unique."

"Vang suggested keeping you half-sedated and cutting off little parts over a long period of time," Muskie said, putting a big check in the basophil column. "I told him his ethnicity was showing."

"We agreed to keep it simple and shotgun you," Vang said, finally turning away from his screen. "The American way."

"Yeah," Muskie agreed. "Ten gauge to the head."

Tarrant noticed Pascali standing in the doorway, glaring at him but not saying a word.

"What's going on here? What're you guys talking about?"

"Because," Muskie said, "every time you walk out of here, everything goes to hell. You see what I'm counting here? Look at this." He held up the chart.

Tarrant looked at it a moment and said, "Jesus Christ, what did you test, your tuna sandwich?"

"He looked like a person to me," Muskie said. "But I could've been wrong."

"Aliens," Vang said. "We got an alien infestation. Look at what Pascali's got."

Pascali waved Tarrant over to a terminal just inside his lab. "Here in front of me," he said, indicating his computer screen, "I have the EKG of Miss Ravinder Chilatavong. Care to glance at it, Tarrant?"

Across the screen were nine parallel scribbles, all of them dense and nasty-looking with dozens of fluctuations between the complexes, lines that shouldn't have come out of the EKG box — and an AVR series that was utterly blank.

Tarrant looked at Pascali, at Vang, and then at Muskie.

"What is all this?" he asked quietly.

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"Take a look at our new coffee pot," Vang said.

Over in the corner, the wall and the floor were splashed brown. Shattered pyrex had blown across the counter and lay in the sink and in the puddle on the floor.

Muskie wadded up his count-sheet and dropped it on the floor. "We're a tiny lab, guys, and if we turn in results like this, the docs are going to think we're over here having ether parties. We'll be selling aluminum siding next month."

"The 12-lead I was using on this guy in the cave gave me the same kind of reading. Maybe something happened to our equipment."

"*This*," Muskie said, "is a microscope. You look through it and you see what's at the other end. What can go wrong with that? We've got something very serious here, Tarrant, and I don't know what it is, but two days now, you leave for your postprandial stroll and about half an hour later, the coffee pot blows up and everything turns to shit." His face was red now. "What the hell are you *doing* out there besides destroying our lab? *How* are you doing it?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. *Look*, for Christ's sake." He held up the tube of blood he'd managed to draw from the blind man. It was dark indigo in color, nearly black.

"What's that?" Pascali asked. "Ink?"

"Blood," Tarrant replied. "From the guy I found in the cave." He looked at Vang. "The guy you said was a hobo. 'Big deal,' you said."

Vang shrugged. "I still say big deal. We measure reality here, not make up stories for the *National Inquirer*."

Tarrant shook his head and proceeded to tell them the whole story, everything that had happened since he'd first seen the open cave. They didn't believe him.

"You want to tell us some halfwit moron is causing all this crap?" Muskie said, gesturing at the lab messes. "What's he supposed to be, some mutant with paranormal powers? Or — what is it, Vang — the thing about Shiva dreaming the world, and if he wakes up, we're all history? Maybe you found Shiva — in California. That make sense to you, Tarrant? Bullshit. Bums and earthquakes — no connection."

"And it blows up our coffee pot just because you've *disturbed* him?" Vang added. "You white people are crazy."

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All Pascali said was, "I'd like to run an EEG on this guy, see what's going on inside his head."

Tarrant nodded. "That's exactly what I want to do. Just check it out. What could it hurt? I mean, *what* could it hurt?"

The Regulator was losing control. No new disruptions had hit the system, but the sphere continued shaking. The air around him crackled and hissed, and he thought the temperature in the chamber was rising.

The Regulator could not quite keep up with the warnings that flashed at him across the wall, though he moved quickly from one trouble spot to the next, pounding at the keyboards, flicking charged toggles, adjusting dials and strips and elevated columns. He was sweating heavily now, and the suit's cooling units kicked in. He did not know how long he could maintain stability.

ULRIKE WALTER stood in the middle of the San Francisco terminal amidst great confusion, though she herself and many other passengers remained quite calm. Apparently flights were coming in inexplicably late or early. The electronic nerve-net on which the airport depended had begun to behave erratically, and passengers by the hundreds were blithely walking through security checks without pausing.

At one point, Ulrike glanced up at an arrival-departure monitor, and instead of seeing the usual text naming cities and flight numbers, she saw a human shape being consumed in flames. The monitor cabinets changed colors, shifting randomly from one glowing hue to another.

As she moved through the terminal, a dense fog began to drift along the floor, passing unhindered through the solid glass windows. It floated around Ulrike, cool and comforting.

She was not disturbed. She thought nothing. She went out the hissing doors and, with hundreds of other calm baggageless passengers, she waited for the bus she knew would take her south and into the mountains.

Vang stayed in the lab while Tarrant led Muskie and the grumbling Pascali back through the mountains to the cave. Vang was supposed to watch a voltmeter they'd hooked up to the lab's electrical supply and

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examine a few blood samples both now and after they returned. They'd borrowed a coffee pot from Vang's mother, and when they'd left, Vang was eating a sandwich and counting Muskie's leukocytes, the smell of fresh coffee filling the air.

Up on the hill, however, there was no aroma of fresh coffee, only a faintly rancid smell. Pascali looked at the cave opening. "We're supposed to go in there?" he said. "Jesus." It was late afternoon by now, and storm clouds had rolled in, blocking out the sun. Inside the cave it was dark, quiet.

Tarrant said nothing but stooped low and stepped under the bushy outcropping and into the gloom. Muskie followed him with the portable EEG module in the aluminum case, and Pascali came last, muttering about bats.

When Tarrant shined the flashlight on the naked man, Muskie gasped and Pascali fell silent.

"How long has he been here?" Pascali asked, his voice now low and professional.

"This is the third day that I know of, but the first day, the floor showed no footprints but my own, and I saw his hair had grown into the sandstone wall behind his head."

Muskie stared at him a moment, muttered, "Bullshit," and then snapped the case open. "Shine that down here, I can't see what I'm doing."

In the half-light Pascali knelt and began hooking the battery to the oscilloscope.

"He doesn't like to be touched," Tarrant told Muskie as he pulled out the contact pads and untangled the wires. "I mean, he *really* doesn't like to be touched."

"What's he going to do," Muskie said, "drool on me? Get the light on the side of his head."

"Just go easy," Tarrant whispered.

"Scope's ready," Pascali said. His face and hands glowed green from its light. Tarrant looked down and saw the smooth lines suddenly spike and dance, filling up the small screen.

The blind man moaned softly — Muskie had the first contact above the left ear.

Pascali clicked several knobs. "This doesn't look right," he mumbled.

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"I can't see this," Muskie complained as he tried to part the man's hair for the second contact. "Get the light here." Tarrant moved the flashlight. When the second electrode touched skin, the oscilloscope flared brilliantly, filling the cave with green light.

Pascali gasped. "I saw — ! I saw something!"

"Good," Muskie murmured. "We know your retinas are functional."

"No, I mean...." Pascali was pointing at the screen that now fluttered and flashed erratically. "I saw a man with a...wearing a pressure suit or something!"

Muskie breathed heavily, working on another electrode, trying to make it stick. "Let's not get too weird, all right?"

Pascali stared into the green light. "His face was...it wasn't human."

"Jesus Christ," Muskie said, "I can't see a god damned thing back here and you're down there on the ground hallucinating." He bumped the naked man's head and the idiot moaned. "Maybe I can just hold these in place. What are you getting?"

Tarrant thought he felt the cave floor tremble.

Pascali's face was bright with sweat. "This isn't...I think this must have been knocked around on our way up here. It's not giving me...." He turned the dials, the soft clicks sounding gauzy and unreal in the musty air. He cranked up the gain, tried adding and dropping frequency filters.

"If it *is* working right," Tarrant said, "what does it mean?"

"It means...." He took a deep breath. "This means massive brain damage, a comatose condition approaching brain death, but here — " He kept playing with the dials, making adjustments. "But...I don't know, at the same time it indicates some kind of intense, organized activity. It doesn't make any — "

The screen fluttered and flashed again.

"God damn it," Muskie said.

"I saw it again!" Pascali said. "He was there again!"

"You didn't see anything," Muskie snapped, pulling away the contacts. "We can't get shit with me holding these things in place — it screws everything up."

"But I saw — "

"Let's get the goon out of here," Muskie said. "This is ridiculous. I wasn't trained to work in the dark."

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Pascali still stared into the screen, which now showed only smooth lines. "If we took him back to the lab we could arrange to image his head with the MR over at the University. That would show us what we've got here."

Muskie had already stuffed the contacts back in the aluminum case and had moved to the far side of the naked man. "Get his other arm, Tarrant. Let's get him out of here and get some light on the subject. You gather up our stuff," he said to Pascali.

"We have to be careful," Tarrant said. "Every time I moved him — "

"Just get him under his other arm," Muskie said.

Tarrant reached down, hesitated, then took hold of the blind man's arm and shoulder.

"Now," Muskie said.

They lifted. The ground shook violently for a moment, and dirt fell from the cave roof.

"Let him go! Let him go!" Tarrant shouted. "Every time I've moved him, that's happened."

Muskie glared at him through the falling dust. "It's an *earthquake*, asshole. You're in California. Get his arm again."

The tremors had ceased and the dirt settled, but they couldn't move the blind man any farther — his hair was still rooted firmly in the cave wall.

"Tarrant," Muskie said, "pull his hair out of the dirt there, will you? Then we can get him out of here."

"No," Tarrant said, "I don't think — "

"Jesus. You brought us up here. Just yank his god damned hair loose and we can get on with this."

"I don't think — "

Muskie stepped around the naked man and swept his hand between head and wall.

Tarrant heard a ripping sound as the blind man's hair tore free of the cave wall. An electrical jolt burst through Tarrant, and suddenly he couldn't see a thing. He heard Pascali, or perhaps it was Muskie, screaming something about his eyes. Everything seemed milky, muffled, and very slow.

Whatever was in Tarrant's hands...what was it he had

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grasped?...whatever it was had turned hard and knobby, like an old tree limb, and something dribbled from his hands down his arm and dripped off his elbow...why couldn't he see? Why didn't he care? He tried to release what he was holding, but his hands wouldn't come free. Krazy Glue, he thought absurdly. Where was he?

He thought he was moving, staggering, dragging something in some direction, though he couldn't feel his feet, and at the moment he at last realized something had gone terribly wrong, at that moment, he was hit by a wall of light and slammed to the ground.

Red erupted across the wall.

Light columns pulsed rapidly with angry crimson, circles of glaring red flashed at the Regulator. Alarm bells sounded, clanging through the chamber.

The stasis field was malfunctioning.

The Regulator turned, looked up at the black sphere, which now trembled violently. Tiny filaments of electric blue sparkled in the air around the sphere.

Suit monitors blinked red into his eyes; the Regulator hit the emergency panels and he heard the clicks and hissing of the vents opening in all the walls, heard the rush of the clear blue gel-fluid pouring into the chamber. The Regulator held his hands away from him, fingered the green tab inside his left wrist.

The clear helmet emerged from his neck collar, quickly formed a bubble over his head, then sealed; air hissed, the suit's internal circulation and heat systems kicking in. Two more flexible, contoured bubbles emerged from the wrist collars, sealed over his hands like gloves as the gel fluid poured into the chamber at an incredible rate and reached as high as his waist.

The clear blue fluid continued to flood the chamber, and the Regulator watched it rise, watched the sphere shaking above him, watched the swirl of electric color around it as the stasis field weakened, sputtered, threatened to completely collapse.

The fluid rose to his neck, then a few seconds later was above his head. The Regulator floated up toward the sphere.

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Ulrike sat quietly in the bus as it rounded the mountain curves and lurched over deep black potholes. Ahead of the bus, like a great metal-backed caterpillar, other buses trailed each other at high speed with no more than half a meter separating them. She looked down at the limp purse she held in her lap and began reciting the Second Canticle of Trust. Her fingers, neatly folded over the black leather, separated from her hands and crawled over her lap like worms.

Her mouth opened, but no sound came out as she broke off her murmuring; in desperation she began saying to herself the Hymn of Horror...no, that wasn't right. The Hymn of Heaven. Yes. The Hymn of —

As she began the opening lines, she looked up and saw a wide, black chasm crossing the narrow road. It could not have been caused by an earthquake — it couldn't have been caused by...anything. It was like an erasure, like her ticket, a gap of nothing across the asphalt, and beyond it rose up a milky vagueness, without trees or sky or ground.

She tried to call from memory the Prayer of Failure, no, of Feigning — she was so confused! The Prayer of Fantasy — no, not right either.

Her fingers melted into gobs of red slime and the man next to her began frantically tearing his clothes off his body. He had black scales over his chest, and his lips became hard and thin with sharp nubs of teeth behind them.

The bus was enveloped in whiteness and silence, and when Ulrike screamed, there was no sound, not even a whisper.

The Regulator rose from the floor, adrift in the thick fluid. He thought he could feel the cold seeping through the suit, overwhelming the heating units, but he knew that was impossible.

He drifted slowly upward, gazing at the dark sphere now shaking violently, the gel-fluid not quite high enough yet. Then a few seconds later the fluid reached the sphere, washing out the crackle of electricity, rapidly enveloped it, and rose the rest of the way to the ceiling. The chamber was full.

Nothing moved. The sphere, its stasis field completely neutralized, no longer shook, no longer trembled. It floated without rising, its buoyancy perfectly neutral.

The Regulator's new sea-like world was nearly silent. The air circ

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system hummed quietly inside the suit; his own breath was a series of regular hisses. He moved his legs and arms, awkwardly swimming upward.

Figures glowed brightly on the sphere, delicate patterns of bright green that might have been letters or ideographs. He swam toward the sphere, then drifted in front of it for a minute, staring at the glowing markings, trying to make some sense of them. Then he moved forward, stretched his arms and legs wide; the Regulator drifted, spread-eagled until he made contact with the sphere, then wrapped his limbs across the dark black metal and green glowing figures. He pressed his helmeted face against the sphere and began to melt into it.

Tarrant's brain worked like an erratically flashing light bulb. For a few moments it would work and he could think, more or less, and then his thoughts would black out, and when he could see again, everything had changed.

In the moments he was conscious, he kept getting momentary flashes of bizarre images, of vast violence, of cannibalism and blood-drinking, of screaming mobs tearing bodies apart with their hands, of thundering destructive earthquakes, and of a world drowned in blood that would quench none of the endless fires.

He seemed to be...in the mountains, standing in the open air, with Muskie and Pascali, and at their feet lay the smiling, unconscious body of....

(torrents of fire swelled from the earth like virgin springs, incinerating the screaming helpless who stood lashed tight to stakes)

Tarrant's feeble attention was drawn to movement below him, down the mountainside. Gleaming silver buses disgorged hundreds of passengers who walked as though they were numb and half blind, as Tarrant himself felt. The passengers moved toward the embankment and began clawing their way up toward them.

Tarrant wanted to ask Muskie, beside him, why this was happening....

(holding a knife high above his head, in the perfect air, the man shouted, "My obedience, my honor, my love, my life, my God!" and brought the blade down in a violent strike, burying it with a ripping slash in his own intestines)

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"Muskie? Where are you? Pascali?"

In blinks and flashes, he saw the exhausted mass slowly making their way up the mountainside. They were dressed in odd, colorful clothes, many of the men wearing narrow-brimmed canvas hats and shorts, some in heavy coats, while the women were dressed in everything from expensive formal wear with glittery jewelry to jeans with daypacks.

Tourists, Tarrant thought. Tourists in tour buses? What in hell is....

(men in chain mail, on rearing horses inside a cathedral, slashing at screaming worshippers, the horses lunging and plunging, blood up to their bellies)

At his feet sprawled the naked idiot, legs bent like the figure 4, and his eyes slightly opened, but with only white showing. Through his parted lips, passed a dull "Uhhhh...."

As Tarrant stared down at him, trying to imagine what he had done to cause this, reality began flickering in and out rapidly, fibrillating, and in the spaces between seeing the sprawled idiot and the approaching, dull-faced tourists, Tarrant saw what Pascali must have seen in the oscilloscope.

Against a field of blue, floated a pressure-suited black figure, and inside the bubble that blossomed out of the shoulders was a face that was not human — there was a stiff look to the skin, and something strange about the eyes.

Tarrant could see its lips moving, but the clattery voice faded in and out. The black figure touched a lighted bar on his chest and his words came in more clearly, in English, at least.

"Return...return the god...to His resting place. Return Him to the cave."

Tarrant gave up all pretense of self-control and assumptions about the rational world following known rules.

As quickly as the black figure had appeared across his vision, it vanished, but everything around him, the mountains, the trees and brush, the tourists, Muskie and Pascali, everything had a queer heaving quality to it, as though the reality-screen on which everything was projected was about to rip.

Tarrant struggled to move toward Muskie, and when he looked into Muskie's stunned eyes, he knew he was seeing the same distorted world.

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"Muskie — "

No response.

"Muskie!" He grabbed a handful of his shirt collar and gave it one shake. "Help me move him!"

Muskie's eyes focused on Tarrant's face. "What did we do?" he mumbled slackly.

"Help me move him!" He pulled Muskie forward by the shirt collar. "Take his arm. Reach down, god damn it, and take his arm!"

When they first moved him, light and darkness flickered around Tarrant, but he tried to keep his feet under him and his hands on the soft flesh of the moaning idiot.

"Pull, Muskie!" Tarrant yelled into his face. "Come *on!*"

Muskie whimpered, his eyes widening and then squinting as he looked down at the soft body they dragged toward the cave mouth. Suddenly Muskie yanked his hands away, staring at the idiot, his teeth bared and his breath rough in his throat.

"Muskie — !"

But then Tarrant saw that the thing they carried was now rough-scaled, black, more reptile than human, and it looked up at them with helpless and malignant eyes. Tarrant wondered if it was still blind.

Across Tarrant's perceptions, the pressure-suited figure reappeared and commanded, "*Return the god to His place of meditation.*"

Tarrant reached across and slapped Muskie. Muskie looked up at him, eyes wide, then backed away and dropped to his knees, moaning.

"Muskie!" Tarrant shouted.

Muskie didn't respond. But then Pascali appeared at Tarrant's side and said, "I'll help you." The old Italian seemed quite calm. Pascali moved around to the other side of the idiot, bent over and took an arm.

The idiot hissed at them as they began dragging him toward the cave. Sharp, metallic teeth glinted in its mouth. Then the scales began multiplying, shrinking in size and increasing in number, rippling across the idiot's body as they changed color from deep black to pale white.

Just as they reached the mouth of the cave, extra limbs sprouted across the thing's body — pale and fragile arms emerged from the neck and chest, and short, thick legs grew from the belly and thighs. It refused to be one thing, as though its reality had become unsettled.

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Tarrant almost released his grip, but Pascali shook his head and said, "Hang on." Tarrant hung on.

On the extra limbs, just inches under Tarrant's face, long thin toes and fingers sprouted and waved gently, mesmerizing Tarrant. Pascali called to him, breaking him out of a trance. And then, as Tarrant and Pascali resumed dragging the naked thing, the extra limbs melted away and the body began to glow, illuminating the interior of the cave.

The scales began rippling again, turning a deep, blood-red. Fingers and toes transformed into dark, sharp claws, and it hissed at them again. The milky white film over its eyes faded, then returned, glowed bright crimson like the scales, then turned white once more.

The ground rumbled, and the light around them flickered. Tarrant didn't know if it was the beast's glow that flickered, or his own vision. He and Pascali dragged it deeper into the cave, toward the wall that had held its hair.

The thing no longer struggled, but it continued to hiss at them. The scales melted away, replaced by a rough, knobby hide. Then the rough hide, too, melted away, replaced in turn by an incredibly clear, plastic-film skin. Arteries and veins, muscle and organs, cartilage and bone — all of it abnormally shaped and linked — were clearly visible inside the body.

They finally reached the back wall, and Tarrant and Pascali propped the blind idiot into a sitting position, head and back against the sandstone wall. The thing's hair snaked away from its head and rooted itself in the wall. Tarrant and Pascali released its arms, and backed away.

The idiot seemed to grow larger as they watched. The flabbiness of its limbs smoothed away, and the muscle increased, flexing, firming. One last time, it hissed through its metallic teeth.

"Jesus." Tarrant stood motionless, staring at it. The clear vinyl skin turned milky, became shiny and solid, yet still it gave off a bright glow. Even the film over its eyes glowed. Limbs and digits flexed. Its teeth clicked together, growing longer and sharper even as Tarrant watched in horrid fascination.

"We have to get the hell out of here," he said to Pascali. He backed away toward the cave mouth, but Pascali didn't move; the old Italian just stared at the monstrous thing glowing and hissing and clicking in the darkness of the cave. "Pascali, come on."

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Pascali finally turned and looked at Tarrant. He nodded once, then with a long look back at it, he followed Tarrant out of the cave.

Outside, a strange, strobe-like flickering illuminated the growing darkness. The tourists from the buses, led by a tall, blonde woman, were climbing up the hillside, headed directly for the cave. Muskie still crouched in the dirt, whimpering.

"Go back!" Tarrant shouted. "For Christ's sake, go back!"

They all stopped except for the blonde woman in the lead. She continued up the hill, making for the cave mouth. Tarrant moved in front of her, blocking the way.

"You can't go in there," he told her. "There's...there's something horrible inside."

The woman just smiled gently at him. After a moment, she said, very softly, "My Lord awaits me."

The woman started forward again, and, feeling helpless, Tarrant stepped back and let her pass. Unable to move, unable to utter a sound, he watched her enter the cave.

ULRIKE ENTERED the cave, then paused for a moment. The glowing light pulsed gently from the rear of the cave, and she could feel it enter her with a healing warmth. The light and heat coursed through her, bright and glowing.

She moved farther into the cave. The heat and light increased, washing over and through her, enclosing and purging her at the same time. The cave walls shimmered, and an incredibly soothing warmth rose from the cave floor.

When she reached the back of the cave, she stopped in front of a brilliant white presence...her Lord. Now Ulrike could see nothing but the Light, feel nothing but the Heat. Both increased around her and within her, and she realized she was becoming One with her Lord.

Heat and Light, Light and Heat, growing and cleansing, swelling inside her. Then it all came together and blossomed in glory.

Tarrant stood by the cave mouth, watching the light flickering inside it. Muskie, though still on his hands and knees, seemed to have

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regained some of his senses.

"Why didn't you *stop* her?" he asked Tarrant.

Tarrant opened his mouth, but had trouble speaking. "I...I..."

"He couldn't," Pascali said. His voice was still calm. "No one could have."

Tarrant knew Pascali was right, but he didn't take much comfort from the old man's words.

A tremendous roar erupted from the cave, followed by a rending scream that was quickly choked off. A wet crunching sound came from within, then quickly ceased.

Another roar went up, this time from the tourists on the slope below. They stampeded, not down the hill as Tarrant had expected, but up the hill and toward the cave. Pasted on their faces were ecstatic smiles, eyes were open wide and glittering, and they held their arms out, ready to embrace...what?

Tarrant scrambled out of the way as the tourists converged on the cave and rushed inside. It was a screaming frenzied mob, and Tarrant knew there was no stopping them. He stood beside Pascali, watching the tourists fight their way inside. Muskie got to his feet, swayed unsteadily for a few moments, then put his hand on Tarrant's shoulder for support.

"What the hell is going on?" Muskie's voice was hoarse.

Tarrant shook his head. How could he know? How could any of them know?

Another roar erupted from within the cave, long and continuous, now intercut with cries and screams and shouts of joy. Joy? Yes, that's what it sounded like. And it sounded like carnage.

The tourists continued to shove and push their way into the cave, maybe three or four hundred altogether, all of them still smiling as they clawed their way inside. Already more people had pressed into the cave than it could possibly hold, Tarrant was certain of that, but they continued to stream into the glowing interior of the hillside. And the roars and screams and shouts sounded from the cave.

Madness, Tarrant thought, utter madness. The light and sky continued to flicker around them, and when he looked down the hill he saw that the empty buses hovered a few inches above the ground. He wondered how he could see so well when it was almost night. The sky above, when it wasn't flickering white, was nearly black and filled with the immense

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contours of thunderheads. He thought he could hear rain falling, but he felt none and saw none.

The three of them stood on the side of the hill, watching the sky and watching the tourists fight their way over each other and into the cave, listening to the screams, the roars, the choking sounds and cries and shouts and all the rest of the madness. Tarrant felt helpless, frozen by a strange, overriding inertia, overwhelmed by confusion. What could he do? Nothing but wait until it all was over.

Time passed in a kind of numbness. The number of tourists dwindled as they continued to disappear into the cave. No one emerged. Tarrant could no longer focus on what that meant. He turned away from the cave and gazed up at the flickering sky, his attention dissipating in the clouds above.

And then, catching him by surprise, silence fell. The last tourist was gone, and when he looked at the cave, it seemed to be empty except for an intense glow of white light coming from the back.

The ground lurched once, then swelled and sank, like a long, rolling earthquake. A loud crack sounded, followed by a rumble, and the side of the hill above the cave collapsed, rock and dirt and brush descending in a small avalanche.

The ground stilled, the flickering light above them ceased, and then a heavy downpour drenched them in cold rain from the thunderheads. But less than two minutes after it began, the cloudburst stopped, and the thunderheads rolled away, clearing the sky and revealing bright thickets of stars and a nearly full moon above them, illuminating the hillside with a clean, silver light.

Tarrant looked once again at the cave...except there was no cave anymore. The hillside had collapsed to completely cover its opening, and in fact it looked as if there never had been a cave, and that there had never even been an avalanche.

"Down there," Muskie said softly, pointing down the hill. Tarrant turned, but didn't see anything. Then he realized that was just what Muskie meant: the buses were gone. Trees, earth, sky, all looked as it had earlier in the day.

Everything appeared to be back to normal. Normal. Except that several hundred people were gone, vanished, and without leaving a trace.

"We should go back," Muskie said. "Back to the lab. See how Vang is."

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Tarrant nodded absently, still burdened with inertia.

"I'm staying up here for a while," Pascali said.

Tarrant turned to look at the old Italian.

Pascali shrugged. "I've seen some things tonight," he said. "And I need to think about what I've seen. So I'll be back later." He paused. "I need to think."

"You're out of your mind," Muskie said.

But Tarrant understood, and he nodded to Pascali. Things were back to normal, but they could never *really* be normal again. "Let him be," Tarrant said. "I'll go back with you."

Muskie started to say something more, but Tarrant abruptly shook his head, cutting him off. "Let's just go."

Muskie sighed, shaking his head. Tarrant turned to Pascali. "We'll see you back at the lab."

Pascali nodded. Tarrant and Muskie started down the hill, and as they entered the trees Tarrant stopped and looked back. He saw Pascali sit on a flat rock in front of the spot where the cave had been and stare at the hillside. How could any of them ever see the world the same way again? What *was* the world? He turned back and followed Muskie down the hill, the question ringing over and over in his thoughts.

The Regulator stood and gazed out over the chamber, at the wall banks, and at the dark, motionless sphere suspended in the air above him. There was not a trace of movement in the sphere, not a glimmer of abnormal readings anywhere. Everything was stable. Everything was in equilibrium once again.

Overall, the disturbance had actually been quite mild. Less than four hundred people destroyed. Nothing compared to some of the disturbances in the past when thousands, even millions of deaths had occurred before he could intervene to regain stability. This time had been practically nothing.

The Regulator turned back to the banks of readouts, checking them all, satisfied. For a while, now, he knew he could relax.

He retracted his helmet into the collar of his protective suit, thinking about the inevitable Final Disturbance. As he slowly drew apart his eyelids, he contemplated the fury of the idiot's dream and the elaborate silence of non-existence.

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INDEX TO VOLUMES 92 & 93, JANUARY-DECEMBER 1997

Asimov, Janet:
Science: Being Warm-Blooded ..... Jan 69
Aurelian, Robin:
Jelly Bones ..... Jun 92
The Santa Trap ..... Jan 118
Bailey, Dale:
Exodus ..... Jul 84
Quinn's Way (novelet) ..... Feb 7
Barstow, D.: *Cartoon* ..... May
Bash, Kent: *Cover for "The Dragons of Springplace"* Feb
Bauman, Jill: *Covers for "Everything's Eventual"* ..... Oc/Nv
"No Planets Strike" ..... Jan
Bell, M. Shayne:
Bright, New Skies ..... Jun 48
Benford, Gregory:
Science ..... Feb,Mar,Sep,Oc/Nv
Bischoff, David:
In the Bleak Mid-Solstice ..... Dec 35
Bisson, Terry:
The Player ..... Oc/Nv .. 164
Blumlein, Michael:
Paul and Me ..... Oc/Nv .. 68
Bourne, Mark:
Mustard Seed ..... Aug 129
Bova, Ben:
The Café Coup ..... Sep 46
Bowes, Richard:
Drink and the Devil (novelet) ..... Feb 54
Streetcar Dreams (novelet) ... Apr 37
Bradbury, Ray:
The Offering ..... Mar 57
Brennert, Alan:
Echoes (novelet) ..... May 131
Brief Reviews: ... Jan, Feb, Mar, Apr, May
Brown, Carroll:
The King of Seventh Avenue (novelet) ..... Jan 24
Bunch, David R.:
A Saint George Pens a Note to His Dragons ..... Sep 56
Canty, Thomas: *Cover for: Monstrosity* ..... Aug
Carr, Michael:
A Dog's Night ..... Dec 82
Castro, Adam-Troy:
The Funeral March of the Marionettes (novella) ..... Jul 103
Clayton, Jo:
Borrowed Light ..... Sep 60
Coates, Deborah:
Tally (novelet) ..... May 105
Cool,Tom:
Universal Emulators ..... Jul 5
Cowdrey, Albert E.:
The Familiar ..... Mar 38
de Lint, Charles:
Books to Look for ..... Jan-Dec
Crow Girls (novelet) ..... Jan 49
Dedman, Stephen:
Schrödinger's Catalyst ..... Dec 110
Di Filippo, Paul:
Plumage from Pegasus ..... Mar, Jul, Sep
Dyer, S. N.:
Sins of the Mothers ..... May 7
Eggleton, Bob: *Cover for: "The Funeral March of the Marionettes"* ..... Jul
Epstein, Benita: *Cartoons* ..... Apr, Jun, Aug, Dec
Etchemendy, Nancy:
Saints and Martyrs ..... Jul 69
Farris, Joseph: *Cartoons* .... Jan, Jul, Oc/Nv
Finch, Sheila:
A Flight of Words ..... Feb 92
The Roaring Ground ..... Apr 8
Friesner, Esther M.:
King of the Cyber Trifles (novelet) ..... Apr 109
Miss Thing (novelet) ..... May 72
True Believer (novelet) ..... Sep 5
Garland, Michael: *Covers for "The Familiar"* ..... Mar
"True Believer" ..... Sep
Gervais, Stephen: *Covers for: "Graffiti"* ..... Jun
"In the Bleak Mid-Solstice" Dec
Goldstein, Lisa:
Down the Fool's Road ..... Oc/Nv .. 156
Goulart, Ron:
Why I Never Went Steady with Heather Moon (novelet) Jun 139
Grossbach, Robert:
Jew on a Chip ..... Dec 9
Guthridge, George, and Janet Berliner:
Notes Toward a Rumpled Stillskin (novelet) ..... Apr 141
Hand, Elizabeth:
Books ..... Aug, Dec
Harris, S.: *Cartoons* ..... Apr, Jun, Aug, Sep, Oc/Nv, Dec
Heath, Mark: *Cartoons* ..... Jan, Oc/Nv
Hoffman, Nina Kiriki:
Manna ..... Apr 135
The World Within ..... Sep 101
Jeapes, Ben:
Pages Out of Order ..... Sep 72
Jonik, John: *Cartoons* ..... Jan, Feb, Mar, May, Aug, Sep, Oc/Nv
Kadleckova, Vilma:
Longing for Blood (novelet) .... Jan 124
Kenden, Leo:
Jinx ..... May 58
Killheffer, Robert K.J.:
Books ..... Jun, Oc/Nv
King, Stephen:
Everything's Eventual (novella) ..... Oc/Nv .. 193

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Kittredge, Mary:
Her House in Order ..... Jul 33
Koja, Kathe, and Barry N. Malzberg:
Orelans, Rheims, Friction: Fire ..... Aug 52
Lee, Mary Soon:
Monstrosity ..... Aug 11
Universal Grammar ..... Apr 85
Lee, Rand B.:
The Green Man ..... Aug 76
The Pearl ..... Mar 83
Lethem, Jonathan, and Angus MacDonald:
The Edge of the Bed of Forever (novelet) ..... Aug 32
Libling, Michael:
Mosquito League ..... Aug 97
Lippincott, Gary A.: *Cover for "The Last Beast Out of the Box"* ..... May
Long, Bill: *Cartoons* ..... Mar, May, Jun, Aug, Sep, Oc/Nv
MacEwan, Pat:
The Macklin Gift (novelet) ... Jun 114
Maio, Kathi:
Films: ..... Jan, Jun, Aug
Martin, Henry: *Cartoons* ..... Jan, Feb, Mar, May, Sep
Martin, Michael A.:
Giants in the Earth ..... Aug 108
Masear, Arthur: *Cartoons.* ..... Apr, Jun, Sep, Oc/Nv, Dec
McDevitt, Jack:
Variables ..... Jul 62
Miller, Jr., Walter M.:
God Is Thus (novelet) ..... Oc/Nv .. 13
Morressy, John:
Rimrunner's Home (novelet) Sep 139
Murphy, Pat, and Paul Doherty:
Science ..... Aug, Dec
Nagata, Linda:
The Bird Catcher's Children (novelet) ..... Jan 79
Hooks, Nets, and Time (novelet) ..... Aug 139
Oltion, Jerry:
The Difference Between Science Fiction and Fantasy ..... Mar 103
Oltion, Jerry, and Kristine Kathryn Rusch:
Deus X (novella) ..... Oc/Nv .. 90
Ore Rebecca:
My Mother, the Alien, and Me ..... Apr 100
Park, Paul:
Get a Grip ..... Dec 54
Patterson, Kent:
That Cruel Pauli Exclusion .. Feb 79
Perry, Steve:
What the Dormouse Said ..... Jan 44
Reed, Kit:
Rajmahal ..... Jun 35
Reed, Robert:
The Dragons of Springplace (novella) ..... Feb 121
Graffiti ..... Jun 9
To Church with Mr. Multhiford ..... Oc/Nv .. 137
Resnick, Mike:
Forgotten Treasures ..... Feb, Jun, Oc/Nv
The Gefilte Fish Girl ..... Apr 29
Richerson, Carrie:
The Quick and the Dead ..... Dec 67
Rosenblum, Mary:
Afterimage ..... Jul 46
Shanahan, Danny: *Cartoon* ... Sep
Shaw, Barclay: *Cover for "The Gefilte Fish Girl," "King of the Cyber Trifles," and "Manna"* ..... *Apr*
Shiner, Lewis:
Like the Gentle Rain ..... Oc/Nv .. 167
Springer, Nancy:
Transcendence ..... Oc/Nv .. 52
Stableford, Brian:
The Pipes of Pan (novelet) ..... Jun 69
Thomas, Michael:
Nightwatch (novelet) ..... Mar 10
Turtledove, Harry:
The Seventh Chapter ..... Sep 111
Turzillo, Mary A.:
Mate ..... Feb 46
Van Gelder, Gordon:
Editorial ..... Jun, Dec
Editor's Recommendations .. Jun, Jul, Aug, Sep
Wade, Susan:
A Recent Vintage (novelet) ... May 25
Watson, Ian:
The Last Beast out of the Box ..... May 91
Wentworth, K.D.:
'Tis the Season ..... Dec 123
West, Jake:
Halls of Burning ..... Aug 64
West, Michelle:
Guilty Pleasures ..... Apr, May
Musing on Books ..... Sep 38
Wightman, Wayne and Richard Paul Russo:
The Idiot's Dream ..... Dec 134
Wilber, Rick:
Where Garagiola Waits ..... Apr 72
Williamson, Jack:
The Hole in the World ..... Oc/Nv .. 63
The Infinite Career ..... Aug 4
Wilson, Robin:
Faster Than a Speeding Bullet ..... Jan 99
Winter, Douglas E.:
Books ..... Jul 24
Winter, Laurel:
David's Ashes ..... Mar 67
Tomorrow Tea ..... Dec 94
Wolfe, Gene:
No Planets Strike ..... Jan 6
Zahn, Timothy:
The Art of War (novella) ..... Mar 120

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

THE CALENDAR CHANGES next month, and since 1998 looks to be a good year, we're going to give you a peek into the coming few months.

In January, Sheila Finch will be giving us a new short novel in her continuing series of "lingster" stories. These tales of the members of the Guild of Xenolinguists strike us as being quintessential Science Fiction adventures, and next month's adventure, "Reading the Bones," is cut from the same cloth as many a classic of SF. It's a bold tale of the planet of Krishna about how the differences in language between different native populations widen the gulf between the people, and about one man who ultimately must try to bridge that chasm.

Also on tap for next month is a new fantasy from Nina Kiriki Hoffman, a tale of time and music entitled "Gone to Heaven Shouting." And we'll have more goodies, including book columns by Michelle West and Doug Winter and a handful of stories you'll have to wait to see.

Some of the highlights of the ensuing months will include a fantastic novelet by *F&SF* newcomer James P. Blaylock, Albert E. Cowdrey's sequel to "The Familiar" (our cover story last March), witty new work by Kit Reed, more of Kedrigern's adventures from John Morressy, new stories by Richard Bowes (reports of the end of Kevin Grierson may have been slightly exaggerated), a tale of time travel by Ian R. MacLeod, and did I mention stories by Rebecca Ore, Mark McGarry, Mark S. Geston, and many others? All this and more—much more—will be yours in months to come. We think 1998 will indeed be a good year.

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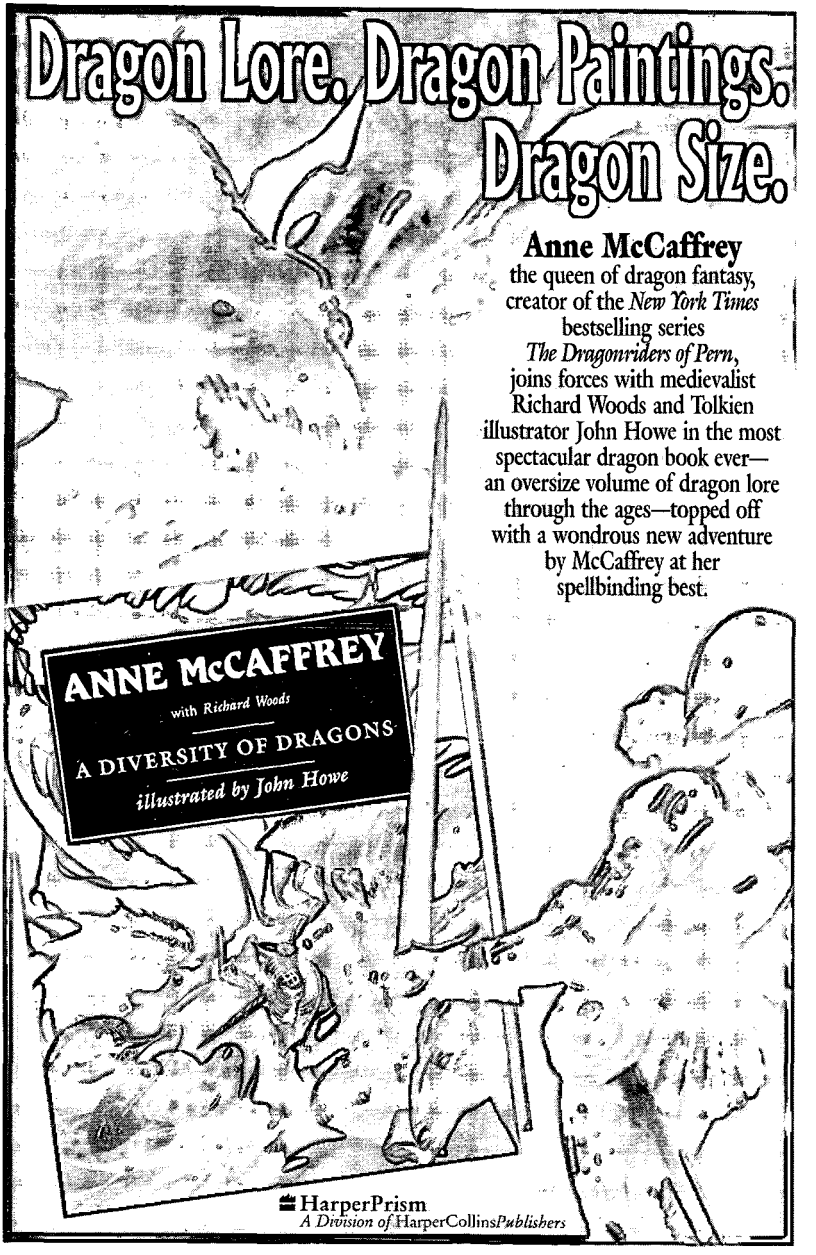

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